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Being Worthy of One's Name
Platonic Tensions Between Language and Reality

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Abstract This essay aims to show to what extent names play a crucial role in Plato's philosophy. Important in terms of their capacity to identify and evoke, the *names* that play a role in Homeric epic are *proper names*. In the Platonic dialogues, this role would appear to have been 'inherited' by *common nouns*, which are assigned an original function within a new cultural context. Within the framework of the paideutic debates that Socrates engages in with his interlocutors, names represent something akin to models to be imitated or goals to be attained. Indeed, *paideia* boils down to the formula that invites human beings to become worthy of their names.

Keywords Names. Platonic dialogues. Akribologia. Ethics. Deontology.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The *Onoma* in the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*: The Warrior's Identity and the Evoking of Someone Absent. – 3 *Onoma* in Plato's Dialogue: The Direction of Research in Philosophy and Life. – 4 Artificialism as a Drive to Perfection. – 5 *Akribologia*. – 6 Conclusions.

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1 Introduction

> For neither conjunction, article, nor preposition could be called δεινόν [terrible] or θυμαλγές [soul-grieving].[1]

Thus writes Plutarch in his *Platonicae Quaestiones*, defending Plato's definition of speech,[2] which seems to reduce language to verbs and nouns.[3] Arousing emotion is a quality of speech that does not reside in articles, conjunctions, or prepositions; therefore, these cannot be regarded as integral parts of language.

To prove that conjunctions are not genuine parts of language, Plutarch writes:

> Now neither an animal nor an instrument nor arms nor anything else is more fine, efficacious, or graceful, for the loss of a part. Yet speech, by taking away conjunctions, often becomes more persuasive. (*QP* 1010E3-6)

As an inspired and inspiring interpreter of Plato, Plutarch upholds the centrality of nouns (as well as verbs,[4] which are also *onomata*) in relation to the Platonic conception of language: they relate to other words as living beings relate to inanimate beings.[5] Compared to

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1 Plutarch, *QP* 1010B7. Here and in the following passages, the translations from Plutarch's *Quaestiones Platonicae* are from Goodwin.

2 See *Sph*. 262a9-c7: "Discourse is never composed of nouns alone spoken in succession, nor of verbs spoken without nouns […]. In neither case do the words uttered indicate action or inaction or existence of anything that exists or does not exist, until the verbs are mingled with the nouns; then the words fit, and their first combination is a sentence, about the first and shortest form of discourse" (The translations of the *Sophist* are from Fowler). See Cherniss 1976; Giavatto 2006.

3 Plutarch, *QP* 1009D4-E4, writes: "For very likely in the beginning men wanted speech and articulate voice, to enable them to express clearly at once the passions and the patients, the actions and the agents. Now, since actions and affections (τὰ πράγματα κὰι τὰ πάθη) are sufficiently expressed by verbs, and they that act and are affected (τοὺς πράττοντας αὐτὰ καὶ πάσχοντας) by nouns, as he [*scil.* Plato] says, these seem to signify. And one may say, the rest signify not. For instance, the groans and shrieks of stage-players, and even their smiles and reticence, make their discourse more emphatic. But they have no necessary power to signify anything, as a noun and verb have, but only an ascititious power to vary speech".

4 Ademollo 2015. The fact that Plato uses the term *onomata* to refer to both names and verbs becomes quite clear if we read *Tht.* 202b4-5 alongside *Cra.* 431b5-c1: see Thornton 1986, 165-79; esp. 167.

5 Plutarch, *QP* 1011A5-B4, writes: "And inasmuch as logicians mightily want conjunctions for the joining together their axioms, as much as charioteers want yokes (ὥσπερ ἡνιόχους ζυγῶν), and Ulysses wanted withs to tie Cyclop's sheep; this shows they are not parts of speech, but a conjunctive instrument (ὄργανόν τι συνδετικὸν) thereof, as the word conjunction imports (καθάπερ ὠνόμασται). Nor do conjunctions join all, but only such as are not spoken simply; unless you will make a cord part of the burthen,

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nouns – Plutarch states – the other terms which are used in language without properly belonging to it are like accessories, with a subordinate and instrumental function:

> prepositions [προθέσεις] are like to the crests of a helmet, or footstools and pedestals [ἐπικράνοις καὶ βάσεσι καὶ ὑποθέμασιν], which (one may rather say) do belong to words than are words themselves. (*QP* 1011D1-2)[6]

The philosopher states:

> join and confound together conjunctions, articles, and prepositions, supposing you would make something of them; yet you will be taken to babble, and not to speak sense. But when there is a verb in construction with a noun, the result is speech and sense. (*QP* 1010A6-B3)

These observations made by Plutarch as an interpreter of Plato may be taken to introduce the topic of the present essay, which aims to prove the fundamental role played by *onomata* not so much in the Platonic theory of speech allegedly developed by Socrates with (or against) one of his interlocutors, but rather in terms of the protreptic power of Plato’s message to his readers.[7] Indeed, I believe that in the dialogues the emotional potential of words is used to lead readers towards philosophy. And I believe that the dialogues are not so much repositories of doctrines or texts from which to draw theories and arguments as dramatic texts in which what really matters is not the views that the characters uphold, but the hidden, not immediately evident, teachings that emerge from the text – through the characters’ discussions or, so to say, in their wake.[8]

What truly matters in the dialogues is what lies at the end of a discussion and at the beginning of another:[9] that drive towards re-

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glue a part of a book, or distribution of money part of the government. For Demades says, that money which is given to the people out of the exchequer for public shows is the glue of a democracy”.

6 Plutarch, *QP* 1010D5, adds that even in the language of the Romans, which “has taken away all prepositions” and which does not admit of any of the words we call articles, we can find the same phenomenon: “nouns (as it were) without skirts and borders”. It is little wonder that Homer puts articles only to a few nouns, “like handles to cans, or crests to helmets” (ὥσπερ λαβὰς ἐκπώμασι δεομένοις ἢ λόφους κράνεσιν).

7 See Gordon 1999.

8 See Gonzalez 1995; Ausland 1997; Erler 2001; Michelini 2003; Press 2007; Charalabopoulos 2012.

9 According to the brilliant interpretation provided by Erler 2021, the aporetic conclusions of the dialogues set the ground for other discussions that will attempt to solve questions left open. From this perspective, it may be argued that the conclusions and

search that occurs in identical form in other times and places, and which is staged in different contexts bears witness to its importance.

The thesis of this essay is that one of these constant drives towards philosophical research found in the dialogues, one of these implicit teachings that can be identified in Plato's texts, is connected to the importance of the *onoma*.

It is a strong thesis. I will endeavour to show that the dialogues lead us towards philosophy by encouraging us to become *worthy of our names*. Each man must become worthy of the name 'man'; each teacher, friend or politician must honour the name he bears. The starting point of this strong thesis is a remark that underlines the role played by the *onoma*, and by the revealing of the *onoma*, in some crucial passages of Homeric epic, which largely serves as the subtext of Plato's dialogues. I will then directly turn to the dialogues *Sophist*, *Republic*, *Protagoras*, and *Gorgias*, where – as we shall see – the *onoma* issue takes a new form.

I will start by noting how, in the *Odyssey*, the *onoma* is used to express heroes' identity, through all the emotional and affective implications connected to the act of naming. I will then move on to consider the *Iliad*, in which the heroes call each other by name before dying and killing. Finally, we will see how, in Plato's dialogues, a crucial role is played, for each living being, by the search for one's 'own name': a name that is no longer a 'proper name', as in Homeric epic, but rather the 'common noun' that is used in the city to describe both an individual's occupation and his or her role in the world.[10]

2 The *Onoma* in the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*: The Warrior's Identity and the Evoking of Someone Absent

The first epic context I wish to consider is very famous: it is one of those passages that make literature's horizons infinite.

This is Book 8 of the *Odyssey*. Odysseus, disguised as an as-yet unknown castaway, is welcomed by Alcinous, king of the Phaeacians. Demodocus, the blind poet, sings about the fall of Troy and mentions glorious Odysseus by name (*Od*. 8.502, 517). A violent emotion overwhelms the hero, who covers his face with his cloak to hide it. The king addresses Odysseus with winged words to persuade him to reveal his identity:

prologues are connecting points – *limbs* – within that *living body* of writings represented by Plato's dialogues.

10 What I mean is that in Plato's dialogues what we are dealing with is not with the 'proper name' or 'personal name' (e.g. Odysseus), as in Homer, but rather one's 'own name', i.e. that name which in the public sphere indicates a person's role (his/her profession etc.).

> Tell me the name by which they were wont to call thee in thy home, even thy mother and thy father and other folk besides, thy townsmen and the dwellers round about. For there is no one of all mankind who is nameless, be he base man or noble, when once he has been born, but parents bestow names on all when they give them birth. And tell me thy country, thy people, and thy city, that our ships may convey thee thither, discerning the course by their wits.[11] (*Od*. 8.550-6)

At the beginning of Book 9 Odysseus reveals his identity to Alcinous: "I am Odysseus, son of Laertes, whom known among men for all manner of wiles, and my fame reaches unto heaven" (*Od*. 9.19).

Another extremely important context in which the hero is asked to reveal his identity is found in Book 9. The setting is the Cyclops' cave. When Polyphemus asks for his name, Odysseus answers: "Noman is my name, Noman do they call me – my mother and my father, and all my comrades as well (*Od*. 9.366-7)". Everything that follows this event in the *Odyssey* is influenced by the name 'Noman' that Odysseus gives the Cyclops. The Cyclop has introduced himself: his name is Polyphemus. As his name indicates, he is a man of many words and great fame. Odysseus claims to be called Οὖτις, meaning 'nobody', but – as Vernant has stressed[12] – this is a pun: if in the word Οὖτις, which literally means "not-somebody", the negation expressed by the syllable οὐ is replaced by the syllable μή, which is also a negation – in Greek μή and οὐ are mostly equivalent – then instead of Οὖτις, which is the *false name* that Odysseus gives Polyphemus to hide, we will have μῆτις, which is the *real name* that expresses Odysseus' true essence. Odysseus, after all, is the hero of μῆτις – cunning, with the ability to come up with solutions, to find a way around problems, and to get by. It is Homer himself who informs us that this is a word game – that Οὖτις is a perfect synonym for Μῆτις, that the name it conceals is the very name it reveals. He does so when he describes blind Polyphemus asking his Cyclops friends for help without receiving any, because they understand μή τίς instead of Οὖτις:

> "What so sore distress is thine, Polyphemus, that thou criest out thus through the immortal night, and makest us sleepless? Can it be that some mortal man (μή τίς) is driving off thy flocks against thy will, or slaying thee thyself by guile or by might?" Then from out the cave mighty Polyphemus answered them: "My friends, it is Noman (Οὖτις) that is slaying me by guile and not by force". And they made answer and addressed him with winged words:

11 *Od*. 8.550-6. The translations from the Homeric poems are from Murray.

12 Vernant 2001.

> "If, then, no man does violence to thee in thy loneliness, sickness which comes from great Zeus thou mayest in no wise escape". (*Od*. 9.403-12)

The name Οὖτις works as a narrative device: by concealing the hero's identity from his enemy (he is Noman), at the same time it reveals this identity to the reader (he is μῆτις, cunning). This revelation – which influences the course of narrated events (the hero will live thanks to his name) – takes place on a deeper level than the one on which the events occur (the name reveals the hero's true essence).[13]

Another case in which Odysseus' name has considerable relevance – this time revealing the *onoma*'s potential on the level of affective memory – is found in Book 4 of the *Odyssey*. Menelaus recalls all the heroes who fought at Troy and utters Odysseus' name before Telemachus:

> yet for them all I mourn not so much, despite my grief, as for one only, who makes me to loathe both sleep and food, when I think of him; for no one of the Achaeans toiled so much as Odysseus toiled and endured. (*Od*. 4.104-7)

As Michele Simondon has emphasised,[14] uttering a person's name is an act of evocation. When he hears his father's name, Telemachus is moved to tears and modestly hides his eyes behind his cloak (*Od*. 4.113-16).

The mentioning of a name also reveals all its importance in the field of affective memory in the dialogue between Eumaeus and the beggar, whom Eumaeus still hasn't recognised as Odysseus. This occurs in verse 145 of Book 14. Eumaeus does not wish to utter his master's name, so he only talks about him using a pronoun: "his name I speak with awe" (ὀνομάζειν αἰδέομαι) – he says – suggesting that the name brings back painful memories. As soon as Eumaeus utters Odysseus' name (144 μ' Ὀδυσσῆος πόθος αἴνυται οἰχομένοιο), memories resurface: "greatly did he love me and care for me at heart". To utter one's own name is to make one's own identity present, to give oneself over to the listener. To utter the name of someone absent is to make him or her somehow present.

The *onoma*'s power is such as to overshadow the importance of the other elements in a sentence. On the Trojan battlefield, each hero utters his own name and patronymic, the name of his people, and

13 Once everything is over, the hero will reveal his name in order to boast of his cunning: "Cyclops, if any one of mortal men shall ask thee about the shameful blinding of thine eye, say that Odysseus, the sacker of cities, blinded it, even the son of Laertes, whose home is in Ithaca" (*Od*. 9.503-5).

14 Simondon 1982, 71-2.

that of his battle companion; most importantly, he utters the name of the enemy he is about to face and who, in the event of victory, will bring him glory. The context is Book 16 of the *Iliad.* Hector, Priam's son, addresses Patroclus before killing him:

> Patroclus, thou thoughtest, I ween, that thou wouldest sack our city, and from the women of Troy wouldest take the day of freedom and bear them in thy ships to thy dear native land, thou fool. Nay, in front of them the swift horses of Hector stride forth to the fight, and with the spear I myself am pre-eminent among the war-loving Trojans, even I that ward from them the day of doom; but for thee, vultures shall devour thee here. Ah, poor wretch, even Achilles, for all his valour, availed thee not, who, I ween, though himself abiding behind, laid strait command upon thee, as thou wentest forth: "Come not back, I charge thee, Patroclus, master of horsemen, to the hollow ships, till thou hast cloven about the breast of man-slaying Hector the tunic red with his blood". So, I ween, spake he to thee, and persuaded thy wits in thy witlessness. (*Il*. 16.830-42)

Here, using an apostrophe, Homer speaks to Patroclus, who in turn addresses Hector:

> Then, thy strength all spent, didst thou answer him, knight Patroclus: "For this time, Hector, boast thou mightily; for to thee have Zeus, the son of Cronos, and Apollo, vouchsafed victory, they that subdued me full easily, for of themselves they took the harness from my shoulders. But if twenty such as thou had faced me, here would all have perished, slain by my spear. Nay, it was baneful Fate and the son of Leto that slew me, and of men Euphorbus, while thou art the third in my slaying. And another thing will I tell thee, and do thou lay it to heart: verily thou shalt not thyself be long in life, but even now doth death stand hard by thee, and mighty fate, that thou be slain beneath the hands of Achilles, the peerless son of Aeacus". (*Il.* 16. 844-54)

In these passages from Book 16 of the *Iliad* – and in many others that could also be mentioned – the names of the heroes stand out for their importance: both the name of the dying hero uttered by the warrior who is killing him, and that of the slayer uttered by the dying man.[15]

15 In the dialogue between Hector and Patroclus in the above-quoted passage, the prophecy of the former's death uttered by the dying Patroclus also makes Achilles' presence felt: the hero is evoked through his name and, in a way, made immortal precisely by the inclusion of his name in the poem that sings of his glory.

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This dramatic structure that connects the *onoma* to promises of heroism and prophecies of death and immortality is also present in post-Homeric culture and society. In an enhanced and at the same time modified form, it likewise occurs in Plato’s philosophy, where the heroism involved is no longer that of the battlefield, which requires strength and courage, but rather the heroism of virtue as such.

3 *Onoma* in Plato’s Dialogue: The Direction of Research in Philosophy and Life

The heroism of virtue that we find in Plato’s dialogues is also connected to *onoma*. The latter, however, is no longer the proper name,[16] which is known to all the speakers, and which occurs in the epic text to identify and evoke an individual as the marker of heroic epic; rather, it coincides with the common noun which, as is always the case in the dialogues, constitutes the outcome of an enquiry begun with a question.

At the beginning of the enquiry, we know *only* the name, but not that to which the name refers. This situation is explicitly laid out at the beginning of the *Sophist*.

The Eleatic Stranger and Theaetetus try to define what a sophist is. They discover that at the beginning all they share is the name (218c2 πέρι τοὔνομα μόνον ἔχομεν κοινῇ), while having different ideas as to what they are calling by that name (218c2-3 τὸ δὲ ἔργον ἐφ’ ᾧ καλοῦμεν). Therefore, by means of arguments (διὰ λόγων), they will have to reach an agreement about the thing itself (218c4 πέρι τὸ πρᾶγμα αὐτὸ) rather than on the name alone, without argument (218c5 ἢ τοὔνομα μόνον συνωμολογῆσθαι χωρὶς λόγου).

This crucial statement of intent at the beginning of the *Sophist* is actually to be found in all dialogues, where it implicitly lies at the beginning of every enquiry: for having names alone, without the arguments seeking to explain these *onomata* by associating them with the *erga* and *pragmata* to which they refer, means having nothing at all. An *onoma* without its *ergon* is nothing.

The first step in any investigation, then, is to be aware of this necessary, mutual implication between *onomata* and *erga*. Words are bridges that help us to understand something extra-linguistic: if they do not lead to this, they lead to nothing at all.

In the *Sophist*, a lengthy enquiry will be required in order to connect the *onoma sophistes* to its *ergon*. Once this has been done, on the very last page of the dialogue the Stranger addresses the follow-

16 According to Chantraine 1984, s.v. “ὄνομα”, this term in Homer indicates the proper name, and with the privative particle – νώνυμνος – means “nameless, without glory”.

ing question to Theaetetus (268c): "Shall we then bind up his name as we did before, winding it up from the end to the beginning?".

Through a lengthy enquiry marked by moments of profound aporetic discouragement, the protagonists of the investigation staged in the dialogue have discovered the nature of the sophist. On the last page of the text, they thus set out to sum up the outcomes they have reached in order to bind (συνδήσομεν) the sophist's name to its *pragma*. Occurring at the beginning and the end of the investigation, the reference to the *onoma* tells us that the whole thing falls within the framework of the drive – underlying every enquiry – to keep names and things together. And it is this, much more than the individual affirmations defining the sophist, which constitutes the dialogue's teaching. Yet there is more to it.

4 Artificialism as a Drive to Perfection

There is one aspect of Plato's philosophy that Vegetti called "artificialismo" (artificialism),[17] which is to say the tendency to think that, in a way, the world, knowledge, society, and man are "artefacts", the possible (and perfectible) products of an intentionality which operates on what is subject to change by referring to an immutable and eternal model. Artificialism entails that in order to create anything, there must be some pliable matter, a perfect model, and a *demiurgos* capable of transforming this pliable matter in accordance with the perfect model. This applies to each thing as much as to the sum of all things: even to create the world, a paradigm of forms is required from which to draw inspiration – the ideas – along with a divine craftsman – the Demiurge – and a spatio-temporal environment onto which these ideal forms can be imprinted. These, as Vegetti recalls, are the cosmogonic ingredients to which Plato resorts in the *Timaeus*.[18]

The reflection on artificialism enables me to touch upon another point: the fact that in Plato's philosophy there is a *direction* in which to orient the movement of transformation, namely that indicated for each living being by its own *name*.[19] This "own name" is not the "proper name", but rather that common noun we use to describe each person's occupation – his or her role in the world.

17 Vegetti 2003, 82 ff.

18 Vegetti 2007, 111-22.

19 To say that matter is moulded in accordance with a given form is to make an abstract claim. In order to be *concretely* traced, and traced via arguments, the path leading to transformation must refer to the level of the meanings associated with the name in question. These exercise an enlightening, and motivating, function with respect to the transformation itself.

Each individual must turn into the complete version of himself, which is precisely the one represented and, so to speak, encapsulated by his *onoma*. Each person, then, must become a physician, a helmsman, a craftsman, a philosopher, and so on, by following his own nature, as inscribed in an *onoma*. The *Protagoras* passage quoted below offers a good example of this: *paideia* is the path we follow to become what we wish to become, by fulfilling our potential and developing our talent. Our abilities are expressed by the aim we pursue: for example, becoming a physician. Becoming worthy of one's name (in *Laches* 179d we find the expression τῶν ὀνομάτων ἄξιοι γένοιντο) is the paideutic path par excellence.

In the context of an argument designed to bring the importance of *paideia* into focus, in the so-called second prologue of the *Protagoras*, Socrates asks Hippocrates (*Prt*. 311b-312a):[20]

> Tell me, Hippocrates, I said, in your present design of going to Protagoras and paying him money as a fee for his services to yourself, to whom do you consider you are resorting, and what is it that you are to become? Suppose, for example, you had taken it into your head to call on your namesake Hippocrates of Cos, the Asclepiad, and pay him money as your personal fee, and suppose someone asked you – Tell me, Hippocrates, in purposing to pay a fee to Hippocrates, what do you consider him to be? How would you answer that?
>
> A doctor, I would say.
>
> And what would you intend to become?
>
> A doctor, he replied.
>
> And suppose you had a mind to approach Polycleitus the Argive or Pheidias the Athenian and pay them a personal fee, and somebody asked you – What is it that you consider Polycleitus or Pheidias to be, that you are minded to pay them this money? What would your answer be to that?
>
> Sculptors, I would reply.
>
> And what would you intend to become?
>
> Obviously, a sculptor.

20 On these passages, see Marino 2019, 17-68. To quote Meoli 2004, 81, "se cercare che cosa sia un sofista significa rincorrere un concetto invisibile, il nome con cui il concetto viene appellato serve a renderlo visibile, il nome è il volto empirico di un concetto" – the name is the means by which the concept becomes an image. The name says something (*legei*, 312c5). The translations of Plato's *corpus* are from Lamb.

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> Very well then, I said; you and I will go now to Protagoras, prepared to pay him money as your fee, from our own means if they are adequate for the purpose of prevailing on him, but if not, then drawing on our friends' resources to make up the sum. Now if anyone, observing our extreme earnestness in the matter, should ask us, – Pray, Socrates and Hippocrates, what is it that you take Protagoras to be, when you purpose to pay him money? What should we reply to him? What is the other name that we commonly hear attached to Protagoras?[21] They call Pheidias a sculptor and Homer a poet: what title do they give Protagoras?
>
> A sophist, to be sure, Socrates, is what they call him.

This passage clearly bears witness to that change in the *onoma*'s paradigm – outlined above – which goes from being a proper name, as in the heroic age (a name expressing the warrior's identity, connected to his country, stock, and patronymic, an identity making the hero unique and unmistakable), to becoming a common noun in a society based on arts and crafts, such as the fifth century BC Athens depicted in Plato's dialogues. This common noun expresses a common good, an activity carried out in the public sphere, such as artisan or philosopher, for instance. What matters now is the competence of the *technites*: the physician, the poet, the sculptor. The quest is not for victory and fame, but for expertise and profit. It is within this framework that – in the *Protagoras* as much as in the *Sophist* – the question about the sophist is addressed, in an effort to examine his ambiguous status on the technical level through an enquiry beginning with a question about the *onoma*:[22] What is Protagoras' name? This is tantamount to asking: Who is Protagoras? What is his profession? What does one become by embracing his *paideia*? Spending time with a teacher means planning to become like him, to imitate him, to repeat his gestures and his profession – in one word, his name. By studying under a poet, we become poets ourselves: along with our teacher's name, we take on his destiny.

Likewise, the lawgiver's activity, which consists in naming things,[23] is not merely to give each thing some kind of determination to distinguish it from all the rest and make it knowable – it is much more than this. It means showing the direction in which things must pro-

21 Cf. Pl. *Grg.* 448b.

22 See *Prt.* 319b: when the assembly must decide περὶ οἰκοδομίας (about building works), builders (τοὺς οἰκοδόμους) are called in to provide advice about building works (περὶ τῶν οἰκοδομημάτων). The *onoma* is repeated three times in two lines – and the same occurs with the laying down of a ship. Cf. *Grg.* 455b.

23 Among the Pythagorean *akousmata*, one states: "The wisest thing is number and, immediately after it, he who has given things their names" (πάντων σοφώτατον ὁ ἀριθμός, δεύτερος δὲ ὁ τοῖς πράγμασι τὰ ὀνόματα θέμενος, Aelian. *var. Hist.* 4.17).

ceed in order to *become what they are*. Only by investigating this aspect can we understand in what sense Platonic artificialism goes as far as to plan – along with a rigorous language, which serves as a compass – a world as perfect as possible.

A particularly significant passage in this respect is the one devoted to *akribologia* in Book 1 of the *Republic*.

5 *Akribologia*

Akribologia can teach us what common nouns truly mean: for example, it can tell us what a physician is, rigorously speaking (341c4-5 ὁ τῷ ἀκριβεῖ λόγῳ ἰατρός). A rigorous argument shows that a physician is (i.e., must be) a healer of the sick (341c7 τῶν καμνόντων θεραπευτής). This answer is 'akribological' insofar as it is provided not by empirical experience, which only grasps the appearance of things, but rather by an enquiry that goes as far as to grasp the essence of the matter. What I mean is that, according to Plato, only he who heals the sick is a physician, and is worthy of this name – not anyone who is called by the name of physician. It is not experience which teaches us that a "physician" is someone who heals the sick[24] – for experience offers plenty of examples of physicians who kill, rather than heal, their patients. This is something we learn from a rigorous argument, according to which a true physician (342d7 ὁ ἀκριβὴς ἰατρός; 345c2 ἀληθῶς ἰατρός) is someone who is true to his name and never errs – for if he does, he is not a true physician. Likewise, the "the pilot rightly so called" (ὁ ὀρθῶς κυβερνήτης) is the ruler of sailors (341c10 ναυτῶν ἄρχων), which is where he gets his name from; the same applies to οἳ ὡς ἀληθῶς ἄρχουσιν, "those who truly rule" (343b5 οἳ ὡς ἀληθῶς ἄρχουσιν), and so on.

The context is Book 1, where Glaucon and Adeimantus embark with Socrates on the search for the nature of justice. Another character who has already taken part in this enquiry is Thrasymachus, the aggressive sophist whose role it is to remind everyone of the nature of the power with which justice must deal.

Each government – Thrasymachus argues – enacts laws in view of its own advantage: democracies issue democratic laws; tyrannies, tyrannical ones. Once laws have been enacted, the just is always identified with what is advantageous to the established government in power (338e-339a); hence, the just is the advantage of the stronger.

24 We do not learn from experience; rather, through its contradictoriness, experience provides the conditions to overcome aporia, which is the hallmark of philosophical conversion. An interesting study, which also draws upon this Platonic idea as a key to interpret the dialogues, is Byrd 2007, 365-81.

In the context of this argument (340c-341a), in order to respond to an objection raised by Socrates, Thrasymachus makes a crucial claim. If – he argues – the just is the advantage of the stronger, then this advantage is always rightly deemed such (by he who is stronger and in power) and there cannot be any errors of judgement in this field, which is to say that of *akribologia* (340e2 κατὰ τὸν ἀκριβῆ λόγον). A physician is someone who heals the sick, a mathematician is someone who makes calculations without any mistakes. An expert – Thrasymachus states – never errs insofar as he is what we claim he is: strictly speaking, no one who is an expert in any art ever makes mistakes. Those who err do so because of some deficiency with respect to their art; hence, an artist as such cannot err. An artist "as such" exemplifies a living being worthy of his name.

Rigorously speaking (κατὰ τὸν ἀκριβῆ λόγον, 340e2), no professional errs: for if someone is mistaken, he displays a lack of knowledge, and hence is no longer a real professional (*R*. 1.340c-e).

The need for a rigorous way of thinking, capable of grasping things in their essence, is paradoxically spelled out in the *Republic* not by the character of Socrates, but by Thrasymachus: it is he who notes that when we think about something in a rigorous way and use its name in order to talk about it, we do not think of that thing in terms of its empirical particularity, but rather of what it is in itself, quite apart from everything which occurs to that specific thing – bearing that name – on the empirical level.

What 'akribological' language defines is a rigorous world in which physicians heal the sick, rulers care for the well-being of those they rule, and those who know how to navigate are called helmsmen. This world, in which no one errs and each individual is anchored in his or her own *onoma*, is the only point of reference for a kind of morality that takes virtue as a whole as its model.

However, the Platonic tendency to envisage names as a compass – a tool that helps human beings to understand in what direction they should orient their education– is not illustrated only by the 'akribological' context of the first book of the *Republic*. The same tendency is reflected by an important passage from the *Gorgias*.

In his discussion with Callicles in this dialogue, Socrates argues: "There is not a single case in which a ruler of a city could ever be unjustly ruined by the very city that he rules *Grg.* 519b-c)".

This argument rests entirely on the meaning of the name[25] προστάτης, which literally means "he who stands in front, in the first row", and hence "leader", "defender", "guarantor". Being the

25 Cf. *Prt.* 326d-e, where Protagoras states that punishment is a form of correction and that it has been given this name precisely because it corrects: καὶ ὄνομα τῇ κολάσει ταύτῃ, ὡς εὐθυνούσης τῆς δίκης, εὐθῦναι.

leader of a city – according to Socrates – means educating it, leading it in the right direction. If a leader is incapable of educating his city, he is not really a leader. If he is put to death by his fellow citizens, this occurs either justly or unjustly, and in both cases, he was not a real leader. In the former case, he is justly sentenced precisely because he failed to do what was required of him. In the latter case, if he is sentenced unjustly, it still means that he failed to educate his fellow citizens to pass correct judgements – hence, strictly speaking, he is not being sentenced unjustly. It is interesting to note that this point is once again explained by taking the sophist as an example:

> For it is very much the same with pretenders to statesmanship as with professors of sophistry. (*Grg*. 519c2-4)

> Now what can be more unreasonable than this plea? That men, after they have been made good and just, after all their injustice has been rooted out by their teacher and replaced by justice, should be unjust through something that they have not! Does not this seem to you absurd, my dear friend? (*Grg*. 519d)

6 Conclusions

In light of all the passages analysed, it may be argued that *onomata* play a crucial role in Plato's philosophy. Important in terms of their capacity to identify and evoke, the *onomata* which play a role in Homeric epic are proper names. In the Platonic dialogues, this role would appear to have been 'inherited' by common nouns, which are assigned a novel and original function within a new cultural context.

What is most interesting to note is the fact that, within the framework of the paideutic debates that Socrates engages in with his interlocutors, names represent something akin to models to be imitated or goals to be attained. Indeed, *paideia* as a whole is encapsulated by that formula which invites human beings to become worthy of their names, so to speak.

When examined through the 'akribological' language that is first introduced in Book 1 of the *Republic*, where we meet the names of *technitai* repeatedly mentioned in the dialogues (the physician, the helmsman), correct *onomata* can be seen to embody the essential characteristics of the tasks of each of these *technitai*. Therefore, clear definitions can serve as compasses for human life. Through the precise knowledge of what these tasks imply and the corresponding proper use of names – 'akribological' words, *onomata* close to their *erga* – human beings can follow the path to virtue, which leads to a place where physicians heal individuals and politicians heal communities; a place where punishments are inflicted to teach people not to

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err, and where each person lives a meaningful life by occupying his or her proper place in the world, which is made up like a language.

Generally speaking, scholars interested in investigating the issue of language in Plato's philosophy focus on the *Cratylus*. But it may be argued that the importance of words in the dialogues has yet to be fully explored and that this enquiry can yield some surprising outcomes if we focus on different dialogues, which only touch upon the issue of names implicitly.

I have sought to take a small step in this direction with the present essay, which I would like to bring to a close through a hermeneutical suggestion that, in an effort to illustrate the evocative – and allusive – power of names in Plato's writing, seeks to identify a figure within the dialogues which, through its many hidden meanings, might be taken to embody the very nature of language.

Let us return to the *Protagoras*, then – to the point in the dialogue where, after crossing the threshold of Callias' house, Socrates and Hippocrates are greeted by the whole throng of sophists. Quoting the Homeric hemistich from *Odyssey* 11.601, in 315b9 Plato makes the *Nekyia* the subtext of this passage in the dialogue, which juxtaposes the figures of Sisyphus and Heracles to those of Protagoras and Hippias. In *Prt*. 315d9 we then come across a new quotation from the Homeric song of the dead (11.582), which is what interests us here:

> "Nay more, Tantalus also did I there behold" – for you know Prodicus of Ceos is in Athens too: he was in a certain apartment formerly used by Hipponieus as a strong-room.

In the Platonic text, Prodicus is therefore assimilated to Tantalus.[26] What – we may ask – is the reason for this assimilation? According to myth, Tantalus has received a terrible punishment in Hades: everlasting hunger and thirst, which he cannot extinguish, despite the presence of water and sweet fruits, as these draw away from his hands as soon as he tries to grasp them. Given that, in Plato's dialogues, Prodicus, the bearer of wisdom about names,[27] embodies language itself, it may be hypothesised that the assimilation of Prodicus to Tantalus represents the endless striving of language to grasp its ungraspable object.

26 See Willink 1983; De Vita 2004.

27 See Taormina 2004, 375-89; 376. According to Socrates, wisdom about names coincides with Prodicus' wisdom. It is variously described in *Euthd*. 277e4, *Cra*. 384b6, *La*. 197d59, and *Chrm*. 163d4.

Names can never touch that which they stand for;[28] people, in their empirical reality, can never attain the perfection which words enjoy within *akribologia*, yet philosophy lies precisely in this striving – the striving of words to express things, the striving to know what things are in order to name them properly, human beings' striving to be worthy of the names they bear and the place they occupy.

This, then, is a possible explanation of Tantalus-Prodicus' punishment: as linguistic animals yearning for virtue, we human beings are condemned to strive after the object of our yearning, to see it and almost touch it without ever really attaining it. This is both our strength and our weakness.

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28 The opposite view was held by Plato's opponent Antisthenes, on whom see Brancacci 1990.

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