

Section «Philosophy. Cultural studies. Religious studies»

Plato's "Cratylus" and "correctness of names"

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In my talk I would like to present Plato's philosophy of language from the analytical point of view. My main goal is to show Plato's program of philosophy of language and argue that from the Platonic position we can approach some of the contemporary philosophical issues. Plato deals with linguistic problems only in one of his dialogues – "Cratylus" – which offers an interesting point of view upon the main question of philosophy of language: what is the status and value of linguistical knowledge (*η περι ονομάτων ορθότητος*) [7].

Firstly, I would like to show antagonism between two main ideas described in the "Cratylus" – naturalism and conventionalism. Secondly, I argue that Plato never consider naturalistic attitude as a serious option and he only criticizes conventionalism in the interpretation of sophists. Therefore, I claim that we should distinguish two different types of conventionalism – the sophist's and the Plato's one. Finally, I would like to present some of the consequences of conventionalism in the Plato's attitude to the theory of ideas.

The question of the ability to communicate was posed at the beginning of the formation of philosophical thought. What is more, two competing theories mentioned before – naturalism (*φύσις*) – and conventionalism (*νόμος*) of language – were originated early [5, 6]. Naturalism states that the names refer to things in an adequate way, and by the language we are able to get to things themselves, on the other hand conventionalism argues that we do not have linguistic access to the nature of things, and the names are assigned to things on the basis of agreement between the recipients of the language. It may appear that Plato in the dialogue "Cratylus", by reference to the etymologies which seems to be the evidence of the priority of names, is arguing in favor of naturalism [8, 9]. However, then he presents the basic principles of linguistic conventionalism, that he finally opts for [3, 5]. Plato bases his theory of the language on the rules of contract within the community established in the process of naming and communication.

In the background of the dispute about the correctness of names lies a question of the possibility of language's exploration of the world. From part of the dialogue on the etymology of names – which are evidence of the natural character of the etymology of language – we can conclude that all things are in motion and flow (strict application of Heraclitean proposition), knowledge is possible if and only if there are fixed and immutable items, such as ideas [9]. Therefore, the study of fluctuating in their nature words is futile and fruitless. In this point we have the Eleatic view of the nature of the language, which says that the study of names does not add anything to our knowledge of the nature of things. However, Plato can not accept this conception because it entails lack of distinction between social contract and naive conventionality (the name of x is determined arbitrarily by me, which leads to extreme relativism), and accepts the possibility of individual language.

We could define the main function of language in Plato's philosophy in two levels pragmatic one – dealing with communicational function, and ontological one – responsible for explain things how they are. Language comprehended this way if should remain within the limits

of the Platonic system must be regulated by ideas. Therefore Plato postulates so-called The Idea of Name which is responsible for the stabilization of the meaning of each name.

Finally, I would be arguing that we should understand dialogue “Cratylus” as a strictly conventionalistic – the words do not correspond to the nature of things, but they are also not arbitrarily assigned to things, as they are based of social contract and agreement (*συνθήκη, ομολογία*) [7]. I would like to present how this conventionalistic proposition we could accommodate with the Plato’s ontology of ideas.

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