

EXCERPT FROM PLATO'S

CRATYLUS

TRANSLATION BY G. SALMIERI, BASED ON H.N. FOWLER

SOCRATES: Let's not investigate whether a particular face, or something of that sort, is beautiful, or whether all such things seem to flow. Rather, let's investigate this: Should we say that the beautiful itself is always such as it is? 439d

CRATYLUS: Necessarily

SOCRATES: But, if it is always passing away, can we correctly say first that it is *this*, and then that it is *that*? Or won't it necessarily, in the very instant while we are speaking, become something else and pass away and no longer be what it is?

CRATYLUS: Necessarily

SOCRATES: How, then, can something that it never in the same state *be* anything? For if it's ever in the same state, then obviously it's not changing at that time. If it's always in the same state and is always the same, without ever giving up its form, then how can it ever change or move? e

CRATYLUS: There's no way.

SOCRATES: No, nor can something that is never in the same state be known by anyone. For at the moment when the would-be knower approaches it, it becomes some other and different thing, so that its quality and state can no longer be known. Surely there is no kind of knowledge about that which is in no state. 440a

CRATYLUS: As you say

SOCRATES: In fact we cannot even say that there is such a thing as knowledge, if all things are changing and nothing remains fixed. For if knowledge itself does not change and cease to be knowledge, then knowledge would remain, and there would *be* knowledge; but if the very form of knowledge changes, at the moment of the change to another form there would be no knowledge, and if it is always changing, there will always be no knowledge. So, on this account, there will be neither anyone to know nor anything to be known. However, if there is always that which knows and that which is known—if there are such things as the beautiful, the good, and likewise for the other things that *are*—then it doesn't appear to me that *these* things can be anything like flowings or motions. b

Whether I'm right about the nature of things, or whether the doctrine of Heraclitus and many others is true, is a difficult question. But surely no sensible man can... condemn himself and all things and say that they are unsound like leaky pots, or believe that all things are just like people afflicted with runny noses, or that all things are afflicted with colds, always dripping. Perhaps, Cratylus, this theory is true, but perhaps it is not. Therefore you must consider the matter courageously and thoroughly and not accept anything carelessly—for you are still young and in your prime; then, if after investigation you find the truth, impart it to me. c d

