PLATO’S ARGUMENTS FOR THE FORMS I: THE ARGUMENT FROM RELATIVES I (FROM CRATYLUS 385D-386E)

HERMOGENES: Yes, Socrates, I can conceive no correctness of names other than this. You give one name, and I another, and in different cities and countries there are different names for the same things. Hellenes differ from barbarians in their use of names, and the several Hellenic tribes from one another.

SOCRATES: But would you say, Hermogenes, that the things differ as the names differ? And are they relative to individuals, as Protagoras tells us? For he says that man is the measure of all things, and that things are to me as they appear to me, and that they are to you as they appear to you. Do you agree with him, or would you say that things have a permanent essence of their own?

HERMOGENES: There have been times, Socrates, when I have been driven in my perplexity to take refuge with Protagoras, not that I agree with him at all.

SOCRATES: What! Have you ever been driven to admit that there was no such thing as a bad man?

HERMOGENES: No, indeed, but I have often had reason to think that there are very bad men, and a good many of them.

SOCRATES: Well, and have you ever found any very good ones?

HERMOGENES: Not many.

SOCRATES: Still you have found them?

HERMOGENES: Yes.

SOCRATES: And would you hold that the very good were the very wise, and the very evil very foolish? Would that be your view?

HERMOGENES: It would.

SOCRATES: But if Protagoras is right, and the truth is that things are as they appear to anyone, how can some of us be wise and some of us foolish?

HERMOGENES: Impossible.

SOCRATES: And if, on the other hand, wisdom and folly are really distinguishable you will allow, I think, that the assertion of Protagoras can hardly be correct. For if what appears to each man is true to him, one man cannot in reality be wiser than another.

HERMOGENES: He cannot.

SOCRATES: Nor will you be disposed to say with Euthydemus that all things equally belong to all men at the same moment and always, for neither on his view can there be some good and others bad, if virtue and vice are always equally to be attributed to all.

HERMOGENES: There cannot.

SOCRATES: But if neither is right, and things are not relative to individuals, and all things do not equally belong to all at the same moment and always, they must be supposed to have their own proper and permanent essence; they are not in relation to us, or influenced by us, fluctuating according to our fancy, but they are independent, and maintain to their own essence the relation prescribed by nature.

HERMOGENES: I think, Socrates, that you have said the truth.