The relationship between Plato's 'Cratylus' and Frege's 'Sense and Reference' in the discourse of the philosophy of language: A continuum or an exploration?

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Abstract : The field of philosophy of language is closely intertwined with the concept of linguistic meaning, as it examines the mechanisms through which language communicates meaning. Many of the fundamental concepts in introductory textbooks on semantics and pragmatics originated from debates where language was seen as a tool for making philosophical assertions about logic, epistemology, ontology, or ethics. Both Plato's 'Cratylus' and Gottlob Frege's 'Sense and Reference' examine the nature of words and their meanings while addressing the relationship between language and reality. Despite being written over two thousand years apart, both works discuss issues related to the nature of words and names, the connection between words and their referents, and the role of language in our perception of reality. Additionally, each work offers valuable insights into the connection between language, meaning, and the nature of reality through their respective theories of meaning. In 'Cratylus', Plato argues that names have a natural connection to the things they represent and that the meaning of a word is determined by its etymology. On the other hand, Frege's theory of meaning posits that the meaning of a word is determined by its reference to an object or concept rather than its origin. He argues that words have both a sense, which determines the concept, and a reference, which determines the object to which the word refers. Despite their differences, Plato and Frege both acknowledge the complexity of the relationship between language and reality and recognize that meaning is a crucial aspect of language. In this paper, I will explore the connections between the dialogue in 'Cratylus' and Frege's sense/reference descriptions. Furthermore, I will argue that Frege's 'Sense and Reference' builds upon and develops specific themes and questions explored in Plato's 'Cratylus', but it is not necessarily a direct continuation of Plato's work.

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Introduction

The philosophy of language has connections to the meaning of language because it studies how language conveys meaning (Potter, 2012). Philosophy encompasses more than just tackling fundamental questions of thought. In the realm of analytic philosophy, language becomes a primary focus of interest and investigation. Language serves as a vehicle for philosophical inquiries, and the process of conveying meaning, which itself holds significant meaning, has captivated philosophers due to its ability to both enlighten and confuse (Tanesini, 2007). Tanesini further asserts that the seemingly simple issue of how words convey meaning has not only distinguished major philosophical schools but also remains a contentious topic in theoretical debates within philosophy.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of two seminal works in the philosophy of language: Plato's 'Cratylus' and Frege's 'Sense and Reference'. These works have had a profound influence on subsequent discussions in the philosophy of language by prominent philosophers such as Bertrand Russell (Clack, 2011), Piero Sraffa and Ludwig Wittgenstein (Albani, 1998), and J. L. Austin (Garvey, 2014). The following sections will present a concise and summarized account of Plato and Frege's contributions to the philosophy of language, offering a subjective perspective from the standpoint of a linguistic explorer.

What is the Philosophy of language?

Philosophy of language is a multifaceted discipline that explores the nature of language, its meaning, and its relationship to reality. It delves into questions about how language is used to convey meaning, how we comprehend the messages communicated to us, and how language connects to the world around us. This field encompasses a broad range of topics, such as the interplay between language and thought, the essence of meaning, the structure of

language, the role of language in communication and comprehension, and the significance of language in knowledge and truth. Moreover, the philosophy of language draws upon insights and methodologies from diverse disciplines, including linguistics, psychology, logic, and literary theory.

The field of philosophy of language explores a range of fundamental questions pertaining to the nature of language and its relationship to the world. It seeks to understand how words and sentences acquire meaning and reference, as well as how language is employed by speakers and listeners to effectively communicate and comprehend one another. Additionally, the discipline investigates the ways in which language influences our perception of reality and our understanding of the world. Furthermore, it delves into the intricate relationship between language and thought, examining the ways in which these two cognitive processes interact and influence one another. In his seminal work 'Speech Acts' published in 1969, John Searle, the highly influential figure in the field of philosophy of language, outlined a set of fundamental questions that constitute the core subject matter of this discipline. Searle remarked:

> How do words relate to the world? . . . What is the difference between saying something and meaning it and saying it without meaning it? . . . How do words stand for things? What is the difference between a meaningful string of words and a meaningless one? What is it for something to be true? or false? (Searle, 1969, p. 3)

The aforementioned inquiries remain the foundation of the discipline, as noted in a more recent study by Davies (2006), which highlights that the fundamental inquiries in the field of philosophy of language revolve around the nature of meaning, comprehension, and communication.

The philosophy of language is a branch of philosophy that explores various questions regarding the nature of language and its relationship to the world. It delves into inquiries such as how words and sentences acquire meaning and reference, and how language is used by speakers and listeners to communicate and understand each other. Additionally, it investigates the ways in which language

shapes our perception of reality and our knowledge of the world. Furthermore, the field examines the intricate relationship between language and thought, and how these two aspects of cognition interact. Through rigorous analysis and examination, the philosophy of language aims to provide insights into the fundamental nature of language and its profound impact on human communication and understanding.

According to Scott Soames, the philosophy of language plays a crucial role in the scientific study of language and its usage (Soames, 2010). Soames considers both natural languages and constructed languages in this argument. Natural languages encompass everyday oral languages, while constructed languages include disciplines such as mathematics and logic. Additionally, language use involves the private and public utilization of thoughts for communication. Soames emphasizes that the representational nature of language is a pivotal aspect. He posits that the representational content of sentences relies on their grammatical structure and the representational content of their constituent parts. Thus, linguistic meaning forms an interconnected system. The philosophy of language, as Miller (2007) explains, encompasses a bewilderingly diverse and complex array of topics, making it one of the most profound and intricate fields within philosophy. Additionally, Miller (2018) points out the critical role of language in philosophical discourse. He stresses the systematic nature of the study, claiming that the philosophy of language addresses some of the most complex and profound topics in philosophy. The primary motivation behind the philosophy of language is the desire to provide a comprehensive explanation of our intuitive understanding of meaning.

Barry Lee (2011) delves into the motivations behind philosophers' interest in the philosophy of language. He highlights that language is not only central to human life, which alone justifies subjecting it to philosophical scrutiny. This observation leads to the question of the relationship between language and thought, a crucial inquiry. Some philosophers argue that language is a necessary tool for thought, suggesting that without language, we would be unable to engage in

the seemingly innate act of thinking. Lee also adds another reason for philosophers' interest in language: the very nature of philosophy, which involves argumentation and conceptual clarification, relies on linguistic tools. Philosophers seek to critically examine these tools, ensuring their adequacy and guarding against language-induced pitfalls that could lead to errors in argumentation, distorted perspectives, or the pursuit of senseless questions arising from confusion.

However, Searle (1971) draws a significant distinction between 'linguistic philosophy' and the 'philosophy of language', emphasizing the importance of this differentiation. Searle explains that linguistic philosophy attempts to solve philosophical problems by analyzing word meanings and the logical relationships between words in natural languages. In contrast, the philosophy of language focuses on ascribing standard features of language, such as meaning, reference, truth, verification, and speech acts.

Plato's Cratylus

Plato's Cratylus (428/427 or 424/423 – 348/347 BC) is a dialogue that explores the nature of language and its relationship to reality. The main characters in the dialogue are Cratylus, Hermogenes, and Socrates, who engage in a philosophical discussion about the nature of words and names. It is considered a middle period work of Plato. We will quote the texts of Cratylus from the 'Complete Works' by Plato published in 1997.

Cratylus argues that the true name of a thing is its essence and that words have a natural connection to the things they represent. According to Cratylus, proper language is crucial for grasping the truth about reality, as words reveal the essential nature of things. This view is often referred to as 'naturalism', as it asserts that words have a natural connection to the things they represent. On the other hand, Hermogenes argues that words are arbitrary and conventionally assigned and that the relationship between words and the things they represent is a matter of convention and social agreement. This view is often referred to as 'conventionalism', as it asserts that the relationship between words and the things they

represent is determined by convention and social agreement.

Socrates is the mediator between Cratylus and Hermogenes and raises several objections to their views. He argues that neither naturalism nor conventionalism provides a complete explanation of the relationship between language and reality and that the true nature of language is complex and difficult to understand. The question of who provides the names we use is explored in the dialogue. Socrates argues that a rule setter is responsible for assigning names. He also suggests that names serve as tools for sharing and dividing things according to their natures. Additionally, he emphasizes that speaking correctly is essential for revealing the essence of things and speaking the truth. To portray the name setting in rule, he (1997) argued – "*Who provides the names we use? A rule setter. [388d-e]*".

Names connect functions more than denoting something, and Things can only have a name with descriptions, which is essential. Names are tools that allow us to – *"instruct each other, that is to say, divide things according to their natures. [388b]"*.

There are three instances of the functions of names, a) tools for sharing (by uttering sound); b) fundamental unit of statements; c) descriptions of things. To describe things, first, naming is a mandatory. Speaking is a sort of action. To speak correctly is to reveal its essence as it was noted (1997) – *"To speak correctly is to speak the truth. [387b]"*.

Names should be names, and here comes the debate of naming and source of the correctness. The text showed (1997) – *"The best possible way to speak consists in using names all (or most) of which are like the things they name" [435c]"*. However, the correctness of the names has a deep layer and somehow connects with human invention, as Plato (1997) argued – *"When is a name correct? the correctness of every name we analyzed was intended to consist in its expressing the nature of one of the things that are. [422c-d]"*.

The debate over the correctness of names is also discussed in the dialogue. Socrates suggests that the correctness of a name depends on its ability to express the nature of the thing it represents. He

acknowledges that names are conceptual and can change over time, but argues that if a name is like the thing it names, then knowing the name is equivalent to knowing the thing. Names are conceptual, and they change over time. It becomes a changed one with the changed concept; thus, they do not remain the same as they were before. To quote from the text (1997) -

"Names don't resemble what they represent in every respect. They resemble what they name if the letters or elements out of which primary names are composed be naturally like things [434a]." Moreover, *"when you know what a name is like, and it is like the thing it names, then you also know the thing, since it is like the name [435d]."*

Nevertheless, Plato's Cratylus (1997) continues to be an important text in the philosophy of language and is widely studied and debated by contemporary philosophers. The study of names has been a subject of interest for philosophers of language throughout history. Chapman & Routledge (2009) mentioned Plato's Cratylus as one of the most renowned works on this topic, Cratylus is a dialogue that revolves around the fundamental question of whether names possess an inherent connection to their referents or if they are as arbitrary as other linguistic symbols.

During the historical period of ancient Greece, specifically during Plato's era, the Greek language demonstrated a remarkable degree of diversity and continuous development. This linguistic diversity was characterized by the presence of distinct regional dialects, including Ionic, Doric, and Attic, among others. The utilization of Attic Greek, primarily in Athens, held significant importance as a language for literary and philosophical discourse. The transmission of Greek literature and culture predominantly occurred through oral means, wherein epic poems such as the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey" played a pivotal role in shaping both the linguistic and cultural aspects of the language (Ostwald, 2011). The emergence of the Greek alphabet in the 8th century BCE facilitated the ability to document and preserve written texts. Plato, a renowned philosopher, made a profound impact on the advancement of the Greek language through his extensive literary works composed in

Attic Greek. Athens, as a prominent center of culture and intellect, played a pivotal role in consolidating the prominence of the Attic accent. Furthermore, the evolution of the Greek language was influenced by philosophical thought, as philosophers placed great emphasis on establishing precise definitions and employing logical arguments. The military campaigns led by Alexander the Great and the subsequent dissemination of Hellenistic culture resulted in the spread of the Greek language and the assimilation of Greek characteristics into other linguistic systems. During Plato's era, the Greek language exhibited considerable diversity and was subject to a multitude of influences, both internal and external. These influences have had enduring effects on Western philosophy and language (Law, 2003).

How does Plato's Cratylus fit in the discussion of the philosophy of language?

Plato's Cratylus, a dialogue that delves into the nature of language and its connection to reality, holds a significant place in the discourse surrounding the philosophy of language. Plato posits that the names assigned to objects possess an inherent link to the objects themselves, and that the meaning of a word is determined by its etymology.

Within the dialogue, Plato engages in a debate regarding whether words possess a natural connection to the objects they represent, or if they are arbitrarily and conventionally assigned. This discussion raises profound inquiries about the correlation between language and reality, including whether language serves as a reliable reflection of reality or if it is shaped by cultural and historical factors.

Cratylus also sheds light on Plato's perspective on the role of language in shaping our comprehension of the world. Plato asserts that the true name of an object lies in its essence, and that the appropriate utilization of language is vital for attaining a genuine understanding of reality. This viewpoint has had a lasting impact on the philosophy of language and remains pertinent to contemporary discussions concerning semantic meaning and reference. All in all,

Plato's Cratylus stands as a seminal work in the history of the philosophy of language, continuously studied and debated by present-day philosophers.

Frege's Sense and Reference

Gottlob Frege (1848-1925) reshaped ongoing language and meaning problems from his perspective. Frege discussed the problem of identity and propositional attitude, explaining it in a structured way based on a mathematical approach. He argued that language has both a sense and a reference, which are distinct from each other. Frege, being both a mathematician and philosopher, occupied a distinctive position that enabled him to introduce a significant innovation in his philosophy of language - moreover, he accomplished this by incorporating elements of formal logic in order to precisely define the meaning of words (Morris, 2007).

In his work "Sense and Reference" published in 1892 (German: *Über Sinn und Bedeutung*), Frege introduced the distinction between the sense and reference of a word. According to Frege, the meaning of a word includes not only its reference to an object but also its sense, which provides information about the object. The sense of a word determines its reference, and the meaning of a word is determined by its position in a network of linguistic and logical relationships.

This distinction between sense and reference has significant implications for our understanding of language and meaning. Frege argued that the sense of a word provides the necessary context and background information to understand its reference, and that the meaning of a word is determined by its usage in language rather than the object it refers to. Frege also discussed the nature of reference, the relationship between language and reality, and the role of language in our cognition and knowledge of the world. He claimed that the reference of a word is determined by its role in a network of linguistic and logical relationships, and that the proper use of language is crucial for grasping the truth about reality. Frege's ideas in 'Sense and Reference' have had a profound impact on the philosophy of language, logic, and epistemology. They

continue to be widely studied and debated by philosophers and linguists. The distinction between sense and reference is considered one of Frege's most significant contributions to the philosophy of language and has influenced subsequent discussions on semantic meaning and reference.

Frege begins by questioning the definition of identity. He argues that only truth value cannot represent identity; identity requires semantic content. The statements 'x = x' and 'x = y' have differences, even though they may refer to the same object. Statement (i) 'x = x' is vague and does not convey any new information, while statement (ii) 'x = y' is informative and conveys new information. Therefore, these two statements cannot be compared in terms of the theory of meaning. Frege explains that informative identity claims express a relation between things and also claim to express a relation between signs. We will quote the classic text 'Sense and Reference' by Frege from the 1948 edition of that publication.

According to Frege, additional information should be associated with the names in sentences. This additional information, provided by names, claims the various ways of knowing the object are senses of the names. Therefore, it can be said that a name expresses its sense. Frege (1948) states, *"A proper name (word, sign, sign combination, expression) expresses its sense, refers to or designates its referent. By means of a sign, we express its sense and designate its referent"* (p. 214). Additionally, a name also designates its referent, which is how sense and reference come together. Senses are modes of presentation because they determine a reference given the state of the world.

Frege proposes that the sense of the names contains the 'cognitive' or 'psychological' value of the names. Eventually, the sense of the complete sentence is called a 'thought' or 'proposition'." Two propositions can share the same cognitive value and thus express the same object. However, propositions like 'the morning star is a celestial entity' and 'the evening star is a celestial entity' have different cognitive values, so they cannot express the same proposition. For Frege, the difference between saying 'morning star

is the morning star' and morning star is the evening star' lies in their sense, i.e., their mode of presentation and being presented. The sense mediates names to the referent (object), where the sense is the definite description that determines the name's referent. Suppose Speaker A and Speaker B refer to the same referent, but they have different senses of the object being referred to.

Furthermore, when two people observe the moon through a telescope, the moon can be considered the referent, the image of the moon on the telescope lens as the sense, and the observer's retinal image of the moon as the conception. Frege (1948) explains, *"Somebody observes the moon through a telescope. I compare the moon itself to the referent; it is the object of the observation, mediated by the real image projected by the object glass in the interior of the telescope, and by the retinal image of the observer. The former I compare to the sense, the latter to the conception or experience. The optical image in the telescope is indeed one-sided and dependent upon the standpoint of observation; but it is still objective, inasmuch as it can be used by several observers" (p. 213).*

Between 1848 and 1925, there was a notable surge in scholarly investigations into advancements in the fields of philosophy, logic, and linguistics. This period witnessed significant growth in linguistics, particularly due to the influential contributions of Ferdinand de Saussure in the realm of structural linguistics. Saussure's work laid the foundation for the subsequent development of the structuralist perspective on language. Another prominent figure during this time was Frege, who was renowned for his expertise in mathematics and philosophy. Frege made significant and ground-breaking advancements in the field of philosophy of language, most notably through the creation of a formal system of symbolic logic (Makin, 2010). Within this conceptual framework, Frege introduced a crucial distinction between sense and reference in language statements. This distinction had a profound impact on the analysis of meaning and reference in language. Moreover, Frege's contributions greatly influenced the development of analytic philosophy, as philosophers like Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein incorporated his ideas into their own works (Kripke,

2008). The impact of Frege's work extended beyond philosophy, as it also played a significant role in the emergence of semiotics, a discipline focused on the examination of signs and symbols. Overall, Frege's contributions continue to have a lasting influence in contemporary philosophy, particularly in the domains of language and logic.

How does Frege's Sense and Reference fit in the discussion of the philosophy of language?

Sense and Reference is a seminal work in the field of philosophy of language and has played a central role in the development of analytic philosophy. In this text, Frege presents a compelling argument that the meaning of a word extends beyond its mere reference to an object, encompassing its sense, which conveys additional information about the object.

According to Frege, the sense of a word not only determines its reference but also shapes its meaning through its position within a network of linguistic and logical relationships. This distinction between sense and reference has had a profound impact on the philosophy of language, challenging traditional perspectives that equate the meaning of a word solely with its reference to an object. Instead, Frege's distinction emphasizes the crucial role of concepts and meaning in shaping our understanding of the world.

Furthermore, Frege's work has contributed significantly to ongoing debates concerning the nature of reference, the relationship between language and reality, and the role of language in our cognitive processes and acquisition of knowledge about the world. His ideas continue to exert a strong influence on discussions in the fields of philosophy of language, logic, and epistemology, and are extensively studied by philosophers and linguists alike.

Similarities between Plato and Frege's concept of meaning in the philosophy of language:

In Cratylus, Plato posits that the names of things are not arbitrary, but rather possess an inherent connection to the essence of the thing they name. This idea aligns closely with Frege's concept of

'sense', which posits that the meaning of a word extends beyond mere linguistic convention and is intricately tied to the idea or concept it represents.

Both philosophers further contend that language plays a pivotal role in our comprehension of the world, with words having the potential to shape our thoughts and perceptions of reality. However, while Cratylus places greater emphasis on the notion that words possess a natural connection to their meanings, Frege highlights the role of social convention and linguistic usage in determining the meaning of words. Hence, the concepts of meaning put forth by both Cratylus and Frege offer invaluable insights into the intricate relationship between language, meaning, and the nature of reality.

Within Cratylus, Plato delves into the notion of 'naturalism', contending that there exists an inherent connection between words and the objects they represent. This perspective suggests that the name of an object bears a direct connection to the essence of that particular object. Similarly, Frege's concept of meaning asserts that the meaning of a word is ascertained through its reference to an object within the world. He argues that the reference of a word is a sense or a concept, which ultimately determines the meaning of the word.

Both Plato and Frege's concepts of meaning explore the intricate relationship between language and the world. Both philosophers propose that the meaning of a word is determined by its relationship to an object or a concept within the world.

Dissimilarities between Plato and Frege's concept of meaning in the philosophy of language:

Plato's Cratylus and Frege's concept of meaning in the philosophy of language exhibit notable differences in their approach, method, and scope of inquiry. These disparities arise from the distinct historical periods and intellectual contexts in which the works were written.

One of the primary distinctions lies in their approach to the relationship between language and reality. In Cratylus, Plato contends that words possess an inherent connection to the objects

they represent, asserting that the proper use of language is essential for grasping the truth about reality. In contrast, Frege's concept of meaning emphasizes the role of concepts and sense in shaping our understanding of the world. Furthermore, Frege challenges traditional views by suggesting that the meaning of a word extends beyond its reference to an object. Another significant difference emerges in the method of inquiry employed by the two philosophers. In Cratylus, Plato engages in a philosophical dialogue, wherein various characters present competing views and arguments. Conversely, Frege adopts a more systematic and analytical approach, utilizing logic and formal language to develop his ideas.

Furthermore, the scope of their inquiries diverges. Plato's Cratylus primarily concerns itself with the nature of language and the relationship between words and things. On the other hand, Frege's concept of meaning extends to broader issues in logic, the foundations of mathematics, and the philosophy of language. While Plato focuses on the referential function of language, Frege explores its cognitive and communicative functions.

Another critical difference lies in the philosophical stances adopted by the two scholars. Plato's Cratylus adopts a naturalistic approach to language, positing that the true name of an object is its essence and that words possess a natural connection to the objects they represent. In contrast, Frege's theory of meaning places greater emphasis on the conventions and rules of language use, arguing that the meaning of a word is determined by its position within a network of linguistic and logical relationships. Moreover, Plato's Cratylus adopts a more skeptical view of language and its ability to accurately represent reality. Plato suggests that language may be unreliable or inadequate for understanding the world. Conversely, Frege maintains an optimistic view of language, considering it a powerful tool for cognition and communication.

Finally, while Plato's Cratylus primarily constitutes a work of philosophy, Frege's theory of meaning draws heavily from mathematical and logical considerations. Frege employs formal language and symbolic notation to express his ideas. In conclusion,

although some similarities exist between Plato's Cratylus and Frege's theory of meaning in the philosophy of language, significant differences in approach and focus distinguish the two works.

A Continuum or an Exploration?

While the two works offer different perspectives on these issues, they both provide important insights into the nature of language and its relationship to reality. They continue to be widely studied and debated by philosophers and linguists. Although written more than two thousand years apart, both works address similar questions about the nature of words and names, the relationship between words and the things they represent, and the role of language in our understanding of reality.

Plato's 'Cratylus' and Frege's 'Sense and Reference' address the nature of language and its relationship to reality, and both offer insights into the nature of meaning and reference. Like Frege, Plato was interested in the relationship between language and reality and the role of language in our cognition and knowledge of the world. In Cratylus, Plato presents two contrasting views on the nature of language: naturalism, which asserts that words have a natural connection to the things they represent, and conventionalism, which asserts that the relationship between words and the things they represent is determined by convention and social agreement.

Similarly, Frege introduces his distinction between the sense and reference of a word, arguing that the meaning of a word is not just its reference to an object but also includes its sense, which conveys information about the object. Frege's distinction between sense and reference challenges traditional views that the meaning of a word is simply its reference to an object and highlights the role of concepts and meaning in shaping our understanding of the world.

Both Plato's Cratylus and Frege's Sense and Reference contribute to debates about the nature of reference, the relationship between language and reality, and the role of language in our cognition and knowledge of the world. In both Cratylus and Sense and Reference, the relationship between language and reality is central to the

discussion, and both works highlight the importance of understanding the nature of language to grasp the truth about reality.

Thus, while Plato's Cratylus and Frege's Sense and Reference were written in different historical periods and employ different philosophical approaches, they both contribute to the ongoing discussion of the nature of language and its relationship to reality. Despite their differences, Plato and Frege both recognize the complexity of the relationship between language and reality and that meaning is an integral component of language.

In this paper, I explored the connections between the Cratylus-based dialogue and Frege's sense/reference descriptions. My argument is that Frege's 'Sense and Reference' builds on and develops specific themes and questions explored in Plato's Cratylus, but it is not necessarily a direct continuation of Plato's work.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has analysed the dialogue-based literary work 'Cratylus' and its investigation into the philosophical aspects of language, namely the discourse on the validity of names for entities based on convention and consensus. There exists a contention asserting that a name can accurately designate an entity only when it aligns with its inherent characteristics, implying the existence of a singular appropriate name for each object, irrespective of societal agreement. Moreover, the philosophical dialogue 'Cratylus' explores the intricate dynamics involved in the process of assigning names and the various techniques employed to achieve consensus in the act of naming. Furthermore, the examination of Frege's theory of 'Sense and Reference' has made a significant contribution to the comprehension of meaning and the intricate relationship between sense and reference. The contributions made by Frege in this particular work have established the fundamental principles that have paved the way for the development of the philosophy of language within the analytic tradition, particularly in present-day discussions within academia.

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