

## language and meaning in the *ethics*. or, why bother with spinoza's latin?

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Commentary on Spinoza's *Ethics* has flourished in recent decades, bringing undeniable rigour to the investigation of a range of persistent interpretive difficulties. But not all areas of scholarship are equally well served. Looking at much of the available commentary, the reader might well forget that the original text was written in Latin and that translation into English, however accomplished, inevitably introduces, at best, instances of imprecision and, at worst, demonstrable inaccuracies. To be sure, there have been noteworthy attempts to bridge this gap, but, as I go on to demonstrate, explication of Spinoza's Latin terminology tends, where it exists at all, to be at the level of semantics and, less often, of etymology. Entirely missing is the discussion of morphemic structure and its relation to the generation of meaning. It is my contention that the study of the *Ethics* would benefit significantly from the development of a guide that is focused specifically on Spinoza's Latin, and in particular on those aspects that are neglected by other commentaries.<sup>1</sup> There are excellent glossaries available which seek to clarify *what* is to be understood by key Latin terms and even from *where* they derive, but nowhere is it adequately explained *how* their meaning comes about.

The main purpose of this essay is to demonstrate the need for the kind of guide I have in mind. It begins with a survey of the critical literature, highlighting the latter's paucity of reference to linguistic concerns, especially in texts where one might reasonably expect to find discussion of such matters. Of course, the absence

of a particular feature does not of itself justify a recommendation for its inclusion; its potential value first needs to be established. I do this in two ways. One is to indicate, if only briefly, instances where clearer linguistic analysis might shed light on current debates.<sup>2</sup> The other is by responding to potential objections to a linguistically based critique, drawing on recent research to show that, contrary to some views, Spinoza's language is a fully rational and finely tuned instrument for the communication of philosophical propositions. Two articles in particular have proved invaluable for the development of my argument and receive close attention. They are "Spinoza's Latinity" by Iiro Kajanto and "Spinoza's Language" by Mogens Lærke. One offers a detailed assessment of the structural and stylistic features of Spinoza's Latin, the other a rigorous and compelling critique of the view that the "meaning" of the *Ethics* is not communicated via its language but, on the contrary, obscured by it. Having demonstrated that his Latin deserves to be taken seriously I look briefly at how Spinoza goes about modifying existing terminology to suit his purpose. I conclude with a few remarks about the content of the proposed glossary, its potential value and, importantly, the limitations of a purely linguistic approach.

## GUIDES TO SPINOZA (1): OVERSIGHTS AND INACCURACIES

One could cite almost any recent study to verify the claim that Spinoza's use of Latin has been seriously overlooked, at least by most Anglophone scholarship.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, there is a small but important body of research that deals specifically with this question, but little of it has flowed through to commentary that is more pedagogically oriented.<sup>4</sup> I'm thinking here particularly of what might be called the "companion" genre. Given that this category is likely to be the first "port of call" for many readers seeking guidance on how to understand the *Ethics*, one might well expect the relation of language to meaning to be more than an incidental concern. Yet this is far from the case.

Take the *Cambridge Companion to Spinoza* and the more recent *Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*. While several contributors note instances where Spinoza's Latin presents interpretive difficulties, these references are relatively few. And while some are informative and well judged, too often they are inadequately developed or even misleading, and in one instance, quite simply wrong. Some examples will help clarify the nature and extent of these defects.

In "Spinoza's Ethical Theory" by Don Garrett we read, as an explanation

of the paired terms “perfect” and “imperfect”: “The Latin meanings of ‘perfect’ (*perfectus*) include ‘accomplished’ or ‘finished.’ Thus, [Spinoza] explains, something was said, in common usage, to be perfect when the speaker believed that the thing had been completed in accordance with the purpose of its creator.”<sup>5</sup>

Now, there’s nothing wrong with translating *perfectus* as “accomplished” or “finished.” What is misleading, however, is the implication that this meaning is additional or supplementary to the “normal” understanding of perfect as “without fault or flaw.” In fact, it’s the other way around: the literal meaning of *perfectus* is “having been made through [to completion]”; if something is finished, it is, by extension, flawless.<sup>6</sup>

Or again, consider this endnote from Alan Donagan’s essay, “Spinoza’s Theology”:

Spinoza’s Latin name for God, ‘*Deus*,’ is masculine; and his name for an infinite being he held to be identical with God, ‘*Natura*,’ is feminine. He sometimes refers to this individual as ‘*Deus sive Natura*’—‘God or Nature.’ In the genders of the pronouns I use in place of these names, I follow Spinoza for the first two: ‘he’ for ‘God’ and ‘she’ for ‘nature.’ For ‘God or Nature’ I use ‘it.’<sup>7</sup>

As a factual statement about the respective genders of the two Latin nouns Donagan is entirely correct; there’s nothing contentious here. But to use this distinction as justification for following suit in English overlooks an important difference between the two languages. While both Latin and English have three genders, masculine, feminine and neuter, the gender of a Latin noun is not automatically determined by the characteristics of its referent. Rather, it is the morphological structure that governs the distinction. For example, there are two Latin nouns for “river,” *flumen* and *fluvius*; the first is neuter, the second masculine. And while in English the nouns “fact” and “thing” are unequivocally neuter, there is no such consistency in Latin: *factum* is neuter while *res* (a thing) is feminine. Clearly, there is no *linguistic* reason why *deus* and *natura* should retain their gender specificity in English; claiming to follow Spinoza in this regard is also misleading, given that in the very use of the terms *deus* and *natura* he had no choice but to accept their pre-encoded gender. Of course, Donagan’s decision, at least as it applies to God, may be justified on other grounds; it could, for instance, be argued that Spinoza wants to lead the reader less abruptly from the familiar, anthropomorphic notion

of God to his more radical concept of God as “substance.” My point is that the explanation needs to be couched in these or similar terms, and not be based on a flawed understanding of the way gender functions in Latin.<sup>8</sup>

One further etymological reference, this time from *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*, cannot be allowed to pass without comment. It's from Martin Lin's contribution, “The Power of Reason in Spinoza”: “Inadequate ideas are those ideas that have inputs from the external environment. This definition resonates with the etymology of ‘*passione*,’ the Latin word for passion, which derives from the verb ‘*passio*,’ [sic] which means to suffer or to undergo. Suffering and undergoing suggest passivity.”<sup>9</sup> Lin is quite right to emphasize the passivity inherent in the concept of passion, but seriously astray in his citation of Latin sources. To begin with, “passion” is not *passione* but *passio*; *passione* is an inflected form, technically the ablative case, which changes the meaning to “by, with, or from passion.” Further, there is no such verb as *passio*; the word for “suffer” or “undergo” is *patior*. *Passio* derives from the past participle, *passus*, which means “having suffered, undergone or endured.”<sup>10</sup>

## GUIDES TO SPINOZA (2): KEY METAPHYSICAL TERMS

More reflective of recent scholarly emphasis on the importance of Spinoza's language, but still deficient in resources that might adequately serve the non-Latinist in linguistic matters, is the *Bloomsbury Companion to Spinoza*. Of particular interest in the present context is an extensive and detailed glossary of Latin terms. Each entry follows a similar format. Typically, this will consist of a brief note on the term's derivation, comments on its use in scholastic, Cartesian or theological contexts, and explanations, with reference to specific instances, of the meaning or range of meanings it acquires in Spinoza's philosophy. This usage will be illustrated by a selection of Latin (and, where relevant, Dutch) quotations, followed by a bibliography of primary sources and select secondary references. It all amounts to a valuable and much needed scholarly resource whose rigour I have no wish to question. It's what is *not* included that I want to draw attention to: omitted across the board is the kind of etymological and morphemic analysis that might show the internal workings through which a given term generates its meaning, particularly where that meaning differs from scholastic and Cartesian precedents.

Take Henri Krop's entries for *modus* and its associated term *modificatio*. In noting that Spinoza uses *modus* both as a "technical philosophical term" and also in the "non-technical sense of way or manner," Krop barely touches on an etymological chain, reference to which might usefully have augmented his otherwise highly illuminating discussion.<sup>11</sup> In classical Latin *modus* has several meanings, only the most evolved of which has the sense of "way" or "manner." Its primary denotation is "a measure with which, or according to which, any thing is measured, its size, length, circumference, quantity." From this it acquires the supplementary sense of "a measure which is not to be exceeded, a bound, limit, end, restriction."<sup>12</sup>

Just how these definitions apply to the Spinozan "mode" becomes clearer when we consider the relation of mode to substance. Two of the points emphasized by Krop are particularly relevant. The first is that, while every mode is dependent on substance, substance is only "indirectly" its cause; a mode is "caused by means of the divine attributes and it is the result of the power of God's essence expressing his nature." A body, for example, as defined in EIID1, is a "mode that in a certain and determinate way expresses the essence of God, in so far he is conceived as an extended thing."<sup>13</sup> The second point draws on EIP25C to establish the *individuality* of a mode: all individual things are modes and, conversely, modes—excluding the problematic category of infinite modes to which Krop makes no reference—are necessarily individual things. Krop goes on to note how completely Spinoza has managed to invert the Aristotelian position: through their identity as modes, individual things have been transformed from "substances in a primary sense into their opposite."<sup>14</sup> To return to the classical definition of *modus*, if a mode is both determinate and individual, is it not then subject to *measure*? Even more pertinently, doesn't a mode constitute a *bound* or a *limit*, without which it could not be identified as such?

The value of consulting the Latin etymology is further demonstrated in the case of *modificatio*. Krop acknowledges this to some extent by pointing out its derivation from the verb *modificare*, a fact which leads him to draw a crucial distinction between "mode" and "modification." Although from their Spinozan definitions the two terms can appear interchangeable, the latter more properly applies to the *process* of modification. It is for this reason, he suggests, that "Spinoza sometimes prefers to use the term 'modification' in the second part of EI which deals with the production of the finite things from the divine substance."<sup>15</sup> This is fine as far as it goes, in that it explains succinctly why Spinoza uses two different terms where one might be thought adequate. A closer look at the etymology of *modificare*, however,

would lead to a clearer sense of what “production” here actually entails. The term undergoes a subtle but important shift between its classical and later usage: it is the measure or limit governing the change that receives emphasis in the classical definition, whereas the postclassical focus is more on the change itself. This is carried into modern English usage where, according to the *OED*, a modification, among other things, is the “act of making changes to something without altering its essential nature or character.” Both aspects are equally indispensable for Spinoza: to modify, or to create a mode, *is* to impose a limit, while at the same time there is absolutely no change to the essential nature of substance.

The relation of mode to substance brings us to the heart of what is most vigorously disputed in Spinozan scholarship. That relation in turn hinges on the role ascribed to the attributes. It’s all very well to describe a mode as a modification. But a modification of what? Of substance? Or of an attribute? For an answer we might usefully start with EIIP7: “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.”<sup>16</sup> Just why this should be the case is clarified by a remark in EIIIP2S where Spinoza insists that “the mind and the body are one and the same thing, which is conceived now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension.” The immediate consequences to be drawn are clear: it is substance, and substance alone, that is modified; the attributes simply determine how that modification is conceived. But, of course, Spinoza doesn’t leave it there. EIIP6 shatters the neatness of this formulation by introducing modes that are modifications not of substance but of individual attributes.<sup>17</sup> Does this then mean that there are two kinds of finite modes? And if attributes can be modified, where does this leave their relation to substance?

These questions have generated a vast amount of commentary even the briefest outline of which would exceed the available space. In order to show as clearly as possible how the etymology of *modus* and *modificatio* might inform a philosophical as distinct from purely linguistic intervention, I’ll focus instead on just two aspects of Yitzhak Y. Melamed’s argument in a recent study of Spinoza’s metaphysics. The first is his disagreement with Edwin Curley over the relation of modes to substance; the second his distinction between a mode of an attribute and a mode of God.

Melamed’s critique of Curley revolves around the function he assigns to Spinoza’s God. Specifically, while Curley sees God as identical to his attributes and no more than “the most general principles of order” whose relation to the finite modes

is purely “causal,” Melamed wants, above all, to preserve God’s substantiality.<sup>18</sup> If Curley’s claim provides an attractive solution to certain problems, it receives, Melamed suggests, little support from the text of the *Ethics*. In contrast, Melamed argues for the inherence of modes in God or substance. In this respect he follows previous commentators such as Don Garrett and Michael Della Rocca, though he rejects Della Rocca’s unconditional coupling of inherence and causation, claiming that it reduces his position to one not that dissimilar to Curley’s. While I agree with Melamed’s view of the *substantiality* of substance, I have some reservations about his approach. Quite rightly, he draws attention to Spinoza’s insistence that the correct way to philosophize is to begin with the infinite and work towards the finite. At the same time, he doesn’t altogether follow this principle which is arguably violated by the very term “inherence.” By conjuring an image of a particular mode being “in” substance as though substance were some kind of container, the logical sequence is effectively reversed. Significantly, too, Spinoza does not use the term “inhere” [*inhaereo*] anywhere in the *Ethics*. Returning to the etymology of *modificatio*, however, we find that its implications for the modification of substance correspond exactly to the “proper order of philosophizing” outlined in EIIP10S2. The process *begins* with substance and *ends* with finite modes which as noted earlier are bounded, subject to a limit and consequently measurable. Of course, this formulation doesn’t solve the many complex problems involved in the generation of the finite from the infinite; what it does, though, is to establish parameters within which solutions that remain true to Spinoza’s philosophy must be found.

The distinction between modes of substance and modes of attributes has been widely discussed in the scholarly literature, but satisfactory explanations of the basis of that distinction are hard to find. As we saw in EIIP6 Spinoza himself refers to modes that are attribute-specific, so whatever the difficulty of reconciling this with EIIP7 and EIIIP2S the distinction can’t simply be brushed aside. The casualty seems more often to be the notion of a single mode conceived under different attributes. Melamed gives Napoleon’s body as an example of a mode of a single attribute, and his mind as an example of a mode of a different attribute. Yet, according to EIIP7, aren’t Napoleon’s mind and body one and the same thing? In seeking a solution to this apparent impasse resort to the etymology of the Latin is an obvious first step. What, for example, does it mean to modify an attribute as distinct from substance? And how, precisely, are we to understand an attribute that is subject to modification?

To return to the *Bloomsbury Companion*, a similar pattern of erudition and omission characterizes Krop's entry for *essentia* for which no derivation is given, this being self-evident with *esse* as the preceding entry (also by Krop). What is of interest here, however, is not the derivation itself but the way an abstract noun has been formed from the present participle *essens* (genitive, *essentis*), to signify something like "beingness," or "the being of what is." My point is that spelling out the morphemic structure in this way provides a vital clue as to the logic behind the choice of terminology, a clue that is all but concealed by Krop's otherwise wholly admirable exposition.

A closer look at the two entries will help to clarify this claim. After noting that, in all likelihood, Spinoza would have "accepted the traditional definition [of 'being'] as 'the act of existing,'" Krop draws attention to the important distinction, attributed to Adriaan Heereboord, between *ens* ("a being") and *esse* "being." *Ens*, he observes, is the "broader" concept, since it encompasses that which might exist but does not necessarily exist, whereas *esse* is exclusively the property of what actually exists.<sup>19</sup> This distinction becomes crucial when we consider Spinoza's concept of essence, distanced from its Cartesian meaning by its application not to a class but to an individual being, thus echoing the Scotian notion of *haecceitas* or "thisness."<sup>20</sup> As Spinoza puts it in EIID2, essence is that which if taken away, "the thing is necessarily taken away," and "without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived." Additionally, it can "neither be nor be conceived without the thing." It will be seen that, given the earlier distinction between *ens* and *esse*, Spinoza's use of a term derived from the latter to denote his understanding of this fundamental ontological category, whatever violence it does to accepted usage, shows commendable precision: actual rather than potential being is a co-condition of essence. Nor should the fact that *essentia* is formed from the present participle of *esse*—neglected, as I have indicated, by Krop—be overlooked here. Essence inseparable from, but certainly not reducible to, existence; it goes on being as long as the thing continues to exist, and vice-versa.

Of course, it might be objected that this explanation is overly reductive, and doesn't illuminate *every* reference Spinoza makes to essence. And what about instances of apparent *internal* contradiction within Spinoza's thought? How, for example, is the act of "taking away" essence to be reconciled with Spinoza's insistence in the *Short Treatise* that essence is eternal and immutable?<sup>21</sup> Rather than having to abandon the link to morphemic structure, I would argue that, on the contrary, the very attempt to maintain linguistic cohesion when faced with

apparent inconsistencies brings what is at stake philosophically into sharper focus. Just how the essence of a finite thing can be considered eternal is clarified by EIID<sub>1</sub> where, as we saw earlier, a body is defined as a “mode that in a certain and determinate way expresses God’s essence insofar as he is considered as an extended thing.” The qualification “insofar as” [*quatenus ut*] is crucial here. A finite thing has no independent existence; it exists only *modally*. Being a mode of God its essence therefore has no existence outside God’s essence. Its essence is finite, then, only to the extent that it *expresses God’s infinite essence within its finitude*. Returning to EIID<sub>2</sub>, we can see that what is hypothetically taken away is precisely this modification of God’s essence.

Discussion of essence occupies an odd position in Spinozan scholarship. Even though it is one of the most frequently used terms, both by commentators and in the text of the *Ethics*, it is rarely given explicit treatment. Its precise meaning is constantly elusive, largely because Spinoza himself doesn’t really tell us what it is, as distinct from what it does, what it involves and what pertains to it. With regard to commentary on the *Ethics*, a comparable focus on matters extraneous to essence itself is widely evident. In *Spinoza’s Metaphysics* Melamed makes numerous references to essence but it is always to the essence of, for example, God, substance or a thing; the concept itself remains unexamined.<sup>22</sup> Another approach is taken by Aaron Garrett who on occasion equates the essence of a thing with its definition.<sup>23</sup> This has some merit, but clearly comes unstuck as soon as one contemplates the wholesale substitution of one term for the other.<sup>24</sup> One commentator who does attempt to deal directly, if only briefly, with essence as a concept in its own right is Jonathan Bennett. Taking Descartes’ observation that “Each substance has one principal property which constitutes its nature and essence, and to which all its other properties are referred,” he notes that this is “roughly” though “not everywhere in the *Ethics*” the sense in which Spinoza uses the term.<sup>25</sup> It seems that any attempt to capture the “essence” of essence will have its limitations and exclusions; At the same time, inconsistency with the etymology and morphemic structure of *essentia* would leave any explanation on decidedly shaky ground.

## TRANSLATORS AND THEIR COMMENTARIES

Turning now to Spinoza’s translators, we find, at least in one instance, nothing to force a revision of the observations already made regarding inadequate consideration of Latin accident and etymology. I’ll deal first with the earlier of

the two standard modern translations of the *Ethics*, that of Samuel Shirley which was first published in 1982. Attention is drawn to the Latin text in several ways. Shirley follows the common scholarly convention of including parenthetically Latin words and phrases where added precision is seen to be needed (or more often, perhaps, to show that what may seem a fanciful rendition is, in fact, entirely faithful to the original). Notes are relatively infrequent and contain little in the way of etymological information. For this one needs to consult the translator's preface which contains useful explanations of key concepts. Once again, though, linguistic analysis is not as thorough as one would want. To take just one example: while Shirley sensibly seeks to divest the reader of modern notions of substance, pointing instead to the term's Cartesian and Aristotelian lineage, he stops short of commenting on its derivation, an inclusion which would have provided a clear, logical underpinning of the medieval meaning.<sup>26</sup> At first sight the etymology seems straightforward: *substantia* or substance is that which stands beneath. Less evident is the role played by the tense of the verb. It is from a *particular form*, the present participle *substans*, that *substantia* derives. In a structure that echoes that of *essentia*, discussed earlier, this gives it the meaning "that which is standing under," and by implication, "that which *continues to stand* under." Both the relational position of substance (for example, to modes) and its indestructibility are thus clearly signified by the morphology of the Latin term.

Edwin Curley's 1985 translation has appeared in several forms, making it the most widely available version. In its stand-alone form and as part of the Curley-edited *Spinoza Reader*, it has, apart from a list of abbreviations and typographical conventions, and a more-or-less biographical introduction, no critical apparatus whatever. For this, one must consult volume one of *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (the same translation), which has detailed notes. These contain a wealth of valuable information, ranging from textual variants and contested readings to summaries of scholarly disputes. Particularly apposite to the present discussion is Curley's documentation of decisions regarding the choice of article. I should point out here that, unlike ancient Greek and modern European languages, Latin has neither a definite nor an indefinite article. The translator must decide whether *substantia*, for example, should be *a* substance, *the* substance or simply substance. Mostly, but not always, this will be evident from the context. Where it is not so clear, the translator's decision may well reflect assumptions that don't align with Spinoza's thought.<sup>27</sup>

Another feature of the *Collected Works* is its comprehensive two-part Glossary-Index. The first section lists English terms used in the translation, alongside the original Latin and in each case the Dutch equivalent. In some instances there are detailed notes. In the second part the order is Latin to Dutch to English. Where relevant, for example, where there are related verbal, adjectival and substantive forms, terms are grouped together. With each entry a full list of page references is included.

Of all the secondary material discussed to this point, it is Curley's annotations in the first section of his glossary that come closest to the kind of attention to the Latin I have been arguing for. Not that this is exactly Curley's purpose: as he explains in a preliminary note the index began as an "aid to translation," specifically, to ensure consistency and accuracy in the choice of English terminology.<sup>28</sup> His comments thus function primarily to justify particular decisions, and for the most part remarks about, say, verb forms or the views of earlier commentators are best read in this context. For example, he offers no morphemic analysis of *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, citing as his reason for leaving these terms untranslated the awkwardness of R.H.M. Elwes' 1883 rendition ("nature viewed as active" and "nature viewed as passive"), along with the judgement that "any translation would involve more interpretation than I care to engage in."<sup>29</sup> And where Curley does discuss etymology the explanatory function is still dominant: while, following Hobbes, he is tempted at times to translate *factum* as "fact," he consistently opts for the more orthodox "deed" on account of the "etymological connection with the past participle of *facere* (to do)."<sup>30</sup>

## COUNTER-ARGUMENTS

I have said enough to indicate the nature and scope of references to Spinoza's Latin terminology in the critical literature, and to establish the overall paucity of linguistic as distinct from semantic elaboration. One might well ask why this is the case. Apart from the perception that modern translations have already taken care of linguistic matters, the simple answer, no doubt, is that readers and in many instances commentators are unlikely to have a grounding in Latin and are therefore inadequately equipped to engage in linguistic analysis. Whatever the merit of this explanation, it is at best incomplete; the actuality turns out to be considerably more complex.

It will be useful before proceeding to raise a potential criticism of both my argument and the way I have gone about defending it. While I may have succeeded in showing that close attention to morphemic structures leads to a more precise understanding of the way signification in Latin functions, there is an unquestioned assumption throughout as to the transparency of that signification, that it maps seamlessly onto Spinoza's thought. To put it another way, to know how the Latin works, I appear to be claiming, is to know, far more precisely than an English translation permits, what Spinoza is trying to say.

This objection, I'll readily concede, is far from frivolous, and might be defended by any of several respectable scholarly positions. While ultimately I go on to reject these counter-arguments, they deserve careful attention. I shall consider three:

- 1) Spinoza by his own admission was not a competent Latinist; if his command of the finer points of the language cannot be guaranteed, then these in turn remain questionable as a guide to his intentions.
- 2) There is nothing privileged about Latin in relation to Spinoza's thought; Spinoza was heir to a philosophical tradition built on concepts that were the same whether expressed in Latin, Arabic or Hebrew; it is the concepts, not the mechanics of language, that require explication.
- 3) Spinoza explicitly questioned the capacity of language to register philosophical truth; linguistic analysis may clarify the process of signification in Latin but has little bearing on what is being said *philosophically*.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF SPINOZA'S LATIN

First, the competence or otherwise of Spinoza's Latin. Once again, the general literature provides little to go on; for the most part we have to be content with just a few scattered remarks. One of these occurs in the Translator's Preface to Spinoza's *Complete Works*. Against Spinoza's self-proclaimed lack of facility with the language (he tells Henry Oldenberg that he will only allow publication of his treatise on Descartes' *Principles* if one of his friends, in his presence, "should give it a more elegant style"), Shirley insists that he "nevertheless succeeded in forging for himself a powerful linguistic instrument, wonderfully lucid, devoid of all rhetoric, and with a peculiar charm of its own."<sup>31</sup> Clearly, Shirley both acknowledges the unusualness of Spinoza's Latin and is captivated by its particular qualities, but

his comments are rather too impressionistic to offer more than a snapshot of its characteristics. One wants to ask, for example: How, precisely, is it deficient? Is Spinoza's self-deprecation justified? And if so, why does he lack full command of the language?

These questions are examined in some detail by Iiro Kajanto in his essay "Spinoza's Latinity."<sup>32</sup> Particularly relevant to a proper critical assessment are the circumstances under which Spinoza came to acquire his knowledge of Latin, and the thoroughness of his grounding in linguistic principles *per se*, by virtue of the "philological methods" practised at the Jewish school he attended.<sup>33</sup> Kajanto also insists that a valid judgement about Spinoza's Latin can only be made against the "general characteristics" of the Latin of his time.<sup>34</sup> I shall consider each of these points in turn.

Just when Spinoza began to study Latin is not entirely certain. According to an early biographer, Colerus, he took lessons for several hours a week from a fellow school student, but it is generally agreed that his serious and systematic study of the language only began when, in his early twenties, he attended classes given by ex-Jesuit priest, Franciscus van den Enden. This in itself would be enough to account for any lack of proficiency in Latin composition. Given its position as the *lingua franca* of seventeenth-century intellectual life, it was usual for an educated European to have studied Latin from an early age. As an outsider to this tradition, Spinoza's situation was very different: his parents' language was Portuguese, the language of instruction at the Jewish school he attended Spanish and the vernacular language of his non-Jewish associates Dutch.<sup>35</sup> In addition, as a prerequisite for scriptural studies, he received a thorough grounding in Hebrew.

The importance of Spinoza's Hebrew education should not be overlooked. Although Hebrew and Latin are quite unrelated—one is Indo-European, the other Afro-Asiatic—the two languages are nevertheless comparable in their dependence on inflected forms. Further, Spinoza's interest in and grasp of linguistic structures is amply attested by his unfinished but meticulously detailed *Hebrew Grammar*. As his posthumous editors comment:

The Concise Grammar of the Hebrew Language which is here offered to you, kind reader, the author undertook to write at the request of certain of his friends who were diligently studying the Sacred Tongue, inasmuch as they recognized him rightly as one who had been steeped in it from

his earliest youth, was diligently devoted to it for many years afterward, and had achieved a *complete understanding of the innermost essence* of the language.<sup>36</sup>

Such philological expertise could not fail to benefit Spinoza's acquisition of Latin. At the same time, the very process of acquiring Latin seems to have sharpened and brought into focus his appreciation of the formal aspects of language in general, to the extent that the organizational structures of Hebrew now appeared in a new light. As Michael Morgan remarks, the *Hebrew Grammar* is "rather distinctive" in that it "uses Latin as a model and so forces Hebrew into a Latinate pattern."<sup>37</sup> The point to be emphasized, however, is not the legitimacy or otherwise of this approach to the explication of Hebrew grammar, but the extent to which it suggests that, whatever the infelicities of Spinoza's Latin composition, they are likely to relate to stylistic polish rather than to grammatical imprecision.

It turns out that this is more or less what an examination of Spinoza's Latin *oeuvre* reveals. In a comprehensive survey, omitting only texts known to have been reworked by others, Kajanto locates a number of syntactic irregularities, most of which can be classed as minor violations of accepted usage. Only in a very few instances, none of those cited occurring in the *Ethics*, is the meaning compromised to any degree. The rest are what a well trained seventeenth-century Latinist would refer to disparagingly as "medievalisms."

To understand what a charge of medievalism meant and why as a stylistic tendency it was frowned upon it will be useful to sketch the evolution of Latin from the classical era to Spinoza's time. Traditional classical scholarship identifies two "great" periods of Roman literature: the Golden Age of the first century BCE and the Silver Age of the first century CE. Already, as the labels imply, there is a perception of decline: the historian Tacitus may deservedly be admired as a prose stylist, but never again, we are to understand, will the classical purity of Caesar or the rhetorical flair and syntactic suppleness of Cicero be matched. This high-water mark will later become an important point of reference, but for the moment one particular feature of classical Latin should be emphasized. In addition to the courtroom speeches for which he is best known, Cicero wrote extensively on philosophy, one of his aims being to make Hellenistic thought accessible to a Roman readership. This required the inventive deployment of the resources of Latin to accommodate new concepts, to "teach philosophy to speak Latin" as he wrote of the legacy of Marcus Porcius Cato. As Phillip Mitsis observes, the

significance of this can “hardly be over-estimated,” given that “Cicero’s coinages helped shape the philosophical vocabulary of the Latin-speaking West well into the early modern period.”<sup>38</sup>

In its subsequent evolution literary Latin underwent several major transformations. The first postclassical phase, known as Late Latin, extended from the late second century CE to about 600 and came about primarily in response to the Christianization of the Roman world. Another factor was the spread of Neoplatonism. Augmentation of the language occurred not so much through the invention of new words as through the transliteration of New-Testament Greek, the addition of prefixes and suffixes, the creation of compound forms or simply by ascribing new meanings to existing words. The process began afresh in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries under the impact of scholasticism. Specifically, it was the attempt, most prominently by Aquinas, to reconcile the newly recovered Aristotelian corpus with the tenets of Christianity that spawned an extensive new vocabulary. Existing terms were modified to create elaborate abstractions, designed to register increasingly attenuated conceptual distinctions. This vastly extended vocabulary, however, often went hand in hand with simplified syntactic structures where the principles of periodic subordination were all but forgotten.

One final development brings us to the Latin of Spinoza’s time. Known as Neo-Latin, it was spawned by the convergence of two seemingly incompatible imperatives. One was stylistically driven, the other a purely practical necessity. As the Renaissance humanists became captivated by the splendours of the recently unearthed classical corpus, they turned disdainfully against their scholastic inheritance and embarked on a major clean-up job, purging the language of its inelegant neologisms and reforming its artless syntax in emulation of their freshly discovered models. At the same time scholarly discourse was under pressure to devise yet another set of new terminology, this time to accommodate advances in the physical sciences. The result was an expansion of the *kinds* of Latin being written. As Kajanto points out tolerance of non-classical elements varied between genres; in poetry and oratory the classical ideal was most strictly upheld, while philosophy and other forms of expository prose were permitted “greater latitude.”<sup>39</sup>

Even by this measure, Spinoza’s Latin is generally considered to be heavily scholastic in comparison, say, with that of Descartes. Over and above the absence of Latin in his early schooling, Kajanto attributes this to the likelihood that Spinoza

was far more widely read in scholastic and scientific literature than in classical Latin. Yet it should not be thought that Spinoza was entirely immune to the influence of Neo-Latin; even though his writing contains a number of scholastic terms he eschewed, Kajanto notes, “the more manifestly scholastic words of the type of *quidditas*.”<sup>40</sup> A valuable feature of Kajanto’s essay is his classification of Spinoza’s terminology according to its origin. Only a few words derive from Neo-Latin, substantially more are scholastic and far more again are Late Latin in origin. All those unlisted—and these constitute the vast majority—are classical.<sup>41</sup>

We can conclude, then, that apart from a very small number of minor grammatical infringements there is no *purely linguistic* reason to question the functionality of Spinoza’s Latin. Whether, like Shirley, we are taken with its “peculiar charm” or whether, as Michelle Beyssade characterizes the usual French response, we consider it “somewhat painful, impoverished and stiff,”<sup>42</sup> what is at stake is its stylistic merit. If anything, its directness and relative lack of rhetorical embellishment enhance rather than impede its clarity.

## WOLFSON AND THE MEDIEVAL HERITAGE

The second objection to the value of close morphological scrutiny of the Latin relates not so much to its alleged invalidity as to its alleged irrelevance. It is implicit in much recent scholarship which privileges conceptual critique over concern with the way Spinoza’s language constructs those concepts and is traceable, I’d suggest, to a claim made by Harry Austryn Wolfson in his influential 1934 study of Spinoza. Wolfson’s reference is to the various branches of medieval philosophy that constituted Spinoza’s sources:

They were all based upon Greek philosophy, at the centre of which stood Aristotle. The same Greek terminology lay behind the Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin terminology, and the same scientific and philosophic conceptions formed the intellectual background of all those who philosophized in Arabic, Hebrew, or Latin. The three philosophic literatures were in fact one philosophy expressed in different languages, translatable almost literally into one another.<sup>43</sup>

This observation allows Wolfson to draw extensively on Arabic, Hebrew and Latin writings to reconstruct the conceptual universe to which Spinoza is heir. In this he succeeds admirably. Questions arise, though, when we consider the extent to

which Spinoza remains within this universe. If the *Ethics* were little more than a novel presentation of traditional views, then Wolfson's analysis would go a long way towards making its propositions fully intelligible. But more recent commentators tend to agree that Wolfson seriously misjudges the innovative character of Spinoza's philosophy.<sup>44</sup> There may well be shared concerns with Maimonides and Crescas but ultimately Spinoza's importance hinges on the radicality of the break with his predecessors. Given that one of the ways in which the break manifests itself is, as we saw earlier, through the assignment of new meanings to inherited terms, investigation of the link between etymology, morphemic structure and signification once again promises to be of value.

## THE OBSCURANTIST ARGUMENT

One last hurdle, however, remains. The view that Spinoza intentionally constructed a language that would obscure rather than communicate his meaning has a long history and commands the support of a respectable body of critical opinion. This final objection has all the more force in that its adherents are able to cite Spinoza's own comments on the limitations of language as evidence.<sup>45</sup> Whatever merit this position can claim—and I'm certainly not dismissing it out of hand—I'll be arguing that, at the very least, it is subject to qualifications that not only salvage my case for closer scrutiny of Spinoza's Latin but strengthen it. In this I am indebted to Mogens Lærke whose 2014 essay "Spinoza's Language" presents a clear and succinct account of the obscurantist position along with a compelling critique of its various arguments.<sup>46</sup> My summary of Lærke's critique is admittedly selective, omitting some aspects and giving considerable emphasis to others so as to support my own position on the importance of Spinoza's Latin. In one or two instances as well, I treat more expansively points that Lærke only touches on.

Lærke identifies two main approaches to the problem of the relation between language and meaning in Spinoza's philosophy which he labels, respectively, "externalist" and "internalist." As an example of an externalist approach he cites Stuart Hampshire's view, derived from Leo Strauss's critique of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, that in the *Ethics* Spinoza "wrote an absurdly crabbed and inelegant Latin, as much to conceal his meanings as to impart them."<sup>47</sup> Like Strauss before him, the motive he ascribes is fear of persecution. Interestingly, Lærke does not bother to refute this claim, but his detailed response to the internalist position implicitly takes stock of externalist arguments as well. Or more pertinently, perhaps, the alleged obscurities, whether or not their presence

is due to extrinsic factors, can be explicated rationally without recourse to any form of “secret” language or occultism.

An impressively detailed and not entirely unpersuasive internalist critique can be found in a 1958 essay by David Savan titled “Spinoza and Language.” Savan’s view, Lærke observes, is that

Spinoza himself considered language constitutively incapable of communicating philosophical truth: “Spinoza’s discussion is in terms of words which are abstract, general and confused,” and “contradictions and difficulties occur so frequently, and so clearly that it is probable that Spinoza was aware of them.” Nonetheless, Spinoza “allowed them to stand” because he believed that “no simple, direct, precise, and consistent verbal account of true philosophy was possible.”<sup>48</sup>

Savan makes so much of the “contradictions and difficulties”<sup>49</sup> he locates that one begins to wonder whether there is any point in reading the *Ethics* at all. But just as Savan, too, appears on the point of being forced to the same conclusion, he throws Spinoza a lifeline: the *Ethics*, he argues, is philosophically coherent provided the centrality of “entities of reason” [*entia rationis*] is acknowledged. Citing Spinoza’s own definition of an *ens rationis*, which he translates as “a mode of thought which serves to make what has been understood the more easily retained, explained, and imagined,” he goes on to emphasize that such entities have “no existence outside the intellect” and are “of use to us only if they function as tools or mental aids and are not treated as if they had some independent status.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, it is a mistake to think of such notions as essence, attribute and mode as actually existing; they are “eyes, as it were, through which the intellect may see more clearly what is presented confusedly in the imagination.”<sup>51</sup>

It will be clear, as Savan readily admits, that *entia rationis* cannot entirely extricate themselves from language; words, after all, are the only means of identifying such *entia*, and of distinguishing one from another. At the same time, for Savan, these intellectual “eyes” occupy a vantage point outside language, from which they are able to perceive “true” ideas among the morass of linguistic confusion. More than this, *entia rationis* of, for example, order and relation facilitate the construction of valid generalizations while further philosophical consequences can be drawn from the application of negative categories such as “nonbeing, limit and falsehood.”<sup>52</sup>

At this point Savan's critique raises more questions than it answers. How, one may well ask, can an entity that itself is identifiable only through language and which operates on linguistically defined concepts remain immune from the limitations of language? The immediate difficulty, I would stress, is not Savan's reading of the *function* of entities of reason but, rather, the minimality of the role he assigns to linguistic signification. If Lærke's critique appears to ignore a sizeable part of Savan's argument—he makes no mention of *entia rationis*—it is not an oversight but due to a more radical intervention: there are no grounds for attributing to Spinoza a rejection of language *per se*; it is only a *certain type of language* that presents an obstacle to philosophical truth. Accordingly, there is no need to appeal to a putative extralinguistic dimension for Spinoza's philosophy to be read coherently.

For Lærke, Savan's argument unravels at two crucial points. The first is his "overly negative" view of the position the imagination occupies in Spinoza's thought, the second his insistence that general terms *cannot do other* than signify "confused universal or transcendental notions." Given Savan's account of the imagination as "nothing but a source of falsity and error" and given too the unseverable link between imagination and language, it follows that for his reading of Spinoza there is no possible basis for a "philosophically apt" language. In the reading Lærke proposes, however, the imagination is not to be condemned as the enemy of true perception but, rather, as nothing but a receptor of external impressions, is entirely "indifferent to error and falsity." The problem, then, is not how to banish the imagination but, on the contrary, "how to construct a language reflecting an imagination guided by the intellect as opposed to a language reflecting an intellect misguided by the imagination."<sup>53</sup> Lærke's second objection relates to the basis on which Savan finds Spinoza's language contradictory (and hence a demonstration of its own philosophical inadequacy). The error, he suggests, stems from Savan's failure to distinguish between confused transcendental and universal notions and what Spinoza calls *common notions*, which Lærke goes on to define as those that "express the order of things as represented adequately by the order of ideas in the human intellect."<sup>54</sup> The point, for Lærke, is that Spinoza himself draws this distinction and attributes inadequacy and confusion *only* to the former category. Further, in most instances, he provides the reader "with some explicit indication as to *which sense* of a word he addresses."<sup>55</sup>

## ENLIGHTENMENT CRITIQUES OF LANGUAGE

How, then, does Spinoza go about constructing a language that is adequate to the task of philosophical explication? In short, Lærke argues, by disrupting and reconstituting the “chains of association” that are responsible for confused and inadequate understanding.<sup>56</sup> As this is by no means a straightforward undertaking it will be useful to spell out the process in some detail. I’ll restrict myself to three key points. First, Spinoza’s project takes place against the background of a new, specifically Enlightenment understanding of language; second, this new understanding provides a tool, over and above the emulation of classical models, for redressing the “errors” of scholastic thought; and third, in the particular methods he adopts Spinoza consciously rejects the approaches of his predecessors.

In a decisive break with the “Adamicist” theories of language that characterize Renaissance thought, early Enlightenment philosophers, including Descartes, Hobbes and the Port Royal Logicians, insisted on the *arbitrariness* of linguistic signification. No longer were words considered to be divinely and immutably bound to the concepts and phenomena they named; rather, they acquire their meanings purely by a process of association. This has two important consequences. First, stability and precision of terminology are no longer guaranteed, as words will mean different things to different people. Second, there is nothing, in theory at least, to prevent meanings being consciously adapted for a particular purpose.

An upshot of these discoveries was the impetus they gave to the investigation of *natural* language in relation to *philosophical* language. This in turn opened the language of the Schools to systematic scrutiny, paving the way for radical reform. One approach, exemplified by Leibniz in the preface to his 1670 edition of a text by Marius Nizolius, was to propose ways of replacing cumbersome scholastic terminology with words drawn from everyday language.<sup>57</sup> For Leibniz, natural language is in principle *always* preferable: “[t]he greatest clarity,” he proclaims, “is found in commonplace terms with their popular usage retained. There is always a certain obscurity in technical terms.” But even though Leibniz goes so far as to suggest that “whatever cannot be explained in popular terms is nothing and should be exorcised from philosophy,” he concedes that technical terms cannot always be avoided. This is particularly the case where substitution would lead to an intolerable degree of “prolixity.”<sup>58</sup>

Leibniz's approach seems quite cautious and minimally interventionist compared to Descartes' some decades earlier in "Rules for the Direction of the Mind." In reference to his "novel" use of terminology, Descartes offers his readers the following explanation of his method:

I wish to point out here that I am paying no attention to the way in which these terms have been used in the Schools. For it would be very difficult for me to employ the same terminology, when my own views are profoundly different. I shall take account only of the meanings in Latin of individual words and, when appropriate words are lacking, I shall use what seem the most suitable words, adapting them to my own meaning.<sup>59</sup>

More decisively than Leibniz, Descartes pulls no punches in his rejection of scholastic terminology. At the same time his faith in the efficacy of natural language is not so evident. While clearly he has respect for the root meanings of Latin words, he sees nothing sacrosanct in acquired usage: where other avenues are exhausted, adaptation of "the most suitable words" is a perfectly legitimate solution to the problem of devising an adequate philosophical language.

More radical still is a proposal by Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole whose attack is directed squarely at the ordinary language that Leibniz champions. Thoroughly at ease with the arbitrariness of the link between signifier and signified, they proclaim with swashbuckling bravado that:

the best way to avoid the confusion of words that one finds in ordinary language is to make up a new language and new words that are attached only to the ideas that we wish that they represent. But, in order to do that, it is not necessary to make up new sounds, for one can employ those that are already in use, while considering them as if they had no signification, in order to give them the [signification] that we want them to have.<sup>60</sup>

Arnauld and Nicole's hypothetical project brings us to the point where instructive parallels can be drawn with the *Ethics*. More than in the case of Descartes, there is, quite unambiguously, a shared suspicion of ordinary language. And if in their exploitation of the arbitrariness of signification Arnauld and Nicole go well beyond Spinoza, the latter's great merit is to have devised a method of attaching new meanings to existing terms in a way that meets the highest standards of philosophical clarity and rigour. Each of these points will repay closer attention.

## SPINOZA'S STRATEGY OF MODIFICATION

As Lærke observes, the privileging of natural language was not an option for Spinoza: it was not, as for Leibniz, the “abstruseness of earlier philosophical language use” that stood in the way; rather, the difficulty was that “earlier philosophy perpetuated and complicated certain problems already present at the level of the natural language it employed.”<sup>61</sup> Simplification alone could not purge philosophical language of the contradictory associations generated by the imagination; a more ambitious form of intervention was called for, one that would disrupt the habitual functioning of the imagination by establishing new patterns of association.

Radical as Spinoza's transformation of philosophical language was, his approach could by no means be described as wilfully idiosyncratic. If his definitions are novel, even to the point of inverting accepted usage, he operates like Descartes within the constraints of conventional etymology and accident. In developing his analysis of Spinoza's language, Lærke acknowledges the similarity of his view to that of Pierre-François Moreau who describes Spinoza's “strategy of philosophical language” as one “where modifications in philosophical language are ‘consciously introduced, beginning from common usage and then by modifying just enough to make it capable of expressing what is adequate’.”<sup>62</sup> There's a clear echo of Descartes here, even if Spinoza's reforms are more wide-ranging.

This brings us to a parting of ways. Lærke's main concern is, as he puts it, “the role that the *geometrical method* has to play in relation to the systematic reconstitution of the peculiar use of philosophical language that Spinoza is engaged in.”<sup>63</sup> The last part of his essay develops his argument for the centrality of the geometric method in some detail. While I thoroughly endorse Lærke's insistence on the *philosophical necessity* of the geometric method over and against those who regard it purely as a *mode of presentation*, I want in the space that remains to take the inquiry in a rather different direction. Given that, far from being a veil concealing a meaning accessible only to the initiate, Spinoza's language can now be seen as an entirely rational component of his philosophical project, the case I have outlined for close etymological and morphological scrutiny becomes incontrovertible. It remains to be observed how, precisely, Spinoza goes about modifying common usage as well as to suggest the potential benefits of such observations for Spinozan scholarship.

There is, I admit, a circularity to any empirical demonstration of Spinoza's strategies for linguistic modification. One begins with the assumption that whatever the meaning Spinoza attaches to a particular term it will be consistent at some level with accepted structural and etymological principles. One then analyses the word according to those principles, applies the results to the context in which the word appears and, predictably, a meaning consistent with that context emerges. While it could be argued that such a method merely leads one to find what one expects to find and therefore proves nothing, I'd nevertheless suggest that the frequency with which the results clarify the link between structure and meaning is a more than adequate justification.

Before proceeding to particular examples, it will be useful to keep in mind several key points. First, whatever violence Spinoza does to traditional concepts, it relates to specific usage, that is, to meanings that have evolved over time, and not to primary signification or morphemic structure. Second, to re-emphasize what was noted earlier, the alleged shortcomings of Spinoza's Latin are stylistic rather than substantive. And finally, it is to the language, first and foremost, that we must look for elucidation of Spinoza's meaning. The geometric method serves to ensure that the way terminology is understood remains anchored to the relevant definitions and axioms, and that propositions can readily be linked to other propositions as needed for rigour and clarity; it is not the repository of some form of occult knowledge.<sup>64</sup>

An instructive example occurs in EIID3 ("By idea I understand a concept of the mind which the mind forms because it is a thinking thing"), at the end of which Spinoza takes the unusual step of explaining his reason for a particular choice of Latin term: "I say concept [*conceptum*] rather than perception [*perceptionem*], because the word perception seems [*videtur*] to indicate that the mind is acted on by the object. But concept seems [*videtur*] to express an action of the mind."

What is not immediately clear is whether Spinoza is appealing to etymology, morphemic structure or current usage, or to any combination of these. Both terms, along with the verbs from which they derive, had already in classical times acquired as one of a range of related meanings their specific philosophical denotation: a seizing by the mind or the formation of a mental concept. Notably, though, the distinction between perception and conception was less pronounced than it has become in more recent times. It is precisely the interchangeability of the two terms that precipitates Spinoza's deliberation. And with more specific regard

to seventeenth-century usage, I'd suggest that Spinoza is pointedly distancing himself from Descartes' terminology; as Theo Verbeek notes, "perception" is the latter's preferred term for the result of cognitive activity.<sup>65</sup> It is tempting to see Spinoza as creating a definitional distinction where none previously existed. But on what basis? In English "seems to indicate" conveys a certain imprecision, an impression that eludes concrete verification. The Latin *videtur* is also used in this sense, but with a caveat: it is the passive form of *videt* [sees] and thus carries the primary meaning of "is seen" or "is discerned," a signification that is decidedly less vague.

Structurally, the distinction rests on the question of agency: one term, Spinoza suggests, indicates that the mind acts, the other that it is acted upon. What makes this less than clear-cut is that both *conceptus* and *perceptus* (from which *perceptio* derives) are participial forms (of *concipio* and *percipio* respectively) which have a passive meaning. Additionally, the prefixes are not as helpful as one would like: *con-* indicates "completeness," *per-* "going through."<sup>66</sup> It is only when we turn to the primary meanings of the verbs that a ground for Spinoza's distinction emerges. For *concipio* we have "to take in" or "receive," for *percipio* "to take wholly" or "to occupy."<sup>67</sup> Thus a concept is formed when an external object is taken in and received by the mind, and a perception when an external object imposes itself on and occupies the mind. As Spinoza would put it, q.e.d.

One final example will suffice to prepare the way for some concluding remarks on the form a supplementary glossary of Latin terms might take and on its potential value to Spinozan scholarship. Consider the crucial distinction, introduced in the scholium to EIP29, between *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*. To be sure, one can gain a workable sense of the difference from Spinoza's definition: the former expresses an "eternal and infinite essence," the latter is a consequence of the "necessity of God's nature." But without a knowledge of Latin, signification will remain entirely arbitrary; with that knowledge a precise logic of differentiation becomes evident.

The first word of each term is *natura* or "nature," in classical Latin more particularly the nature of something. This in turn derives from *natus*, the past participle of *nascor*, I am born. So the nature of something is its inborn or innate character. The second word in each case comes from the same postclassical verb *naturo*, "I give existence to,"<sup>68</sup> but with a different suffix. It will be recalled that the *-ans* suffix creates the present participle, while *-atus*, or in this instance the feminine *-ata*, is

the form of the perfect or past participle which is passive. Thus *Natura naturans* is “Nature that goes on giving existence” while *Natura naturata* is “Nature that has been given existence.”<sup>69</sup>

## FINAL REMARKS

While these and the earlier examples drawn from the various commentaries point to some of the ways in which close attention to the Latin terminology can illuminate our understanding of the *Ethics*, they represent just a sample of the many words that might be similarly treated. As for Lærke’s critique and the examination of Spinoza’s use of language that it has prompted, it leaves, I’d contend, no doubt that the morphological examination of individual terms is crucial to the ongoing scholarly endeavour of explicating Spinoza’s text. Further, the contents of a glossary that might meet this need can now be more clearly discerned. We can readily identify several necessary components for each entry: first, a detailed etymology, covering classical, late Latin, and scholastic usage as applicable; second, a morphological analysis, that is, an account of the precise way in which a particular inflection or the addition of a prefix or suffix affects the meaning; and third, an indication of the most likely signification—or significations—in the context of the *Ethics*. Additionally, I would envisage a preface outlining the structural and grammatical principles governing the most frequently encountered inflected forms. It would need to be detailed enough to explain the finer points of individual entries, and at the same sufficiently non-technical to be accessible to a reader with little or no Latin.

One final point remains to be stressed. In no way am I advocating etymological and morphemic analysis as a substitute for the demanding task of sustained philosophical inquiry. If we accept, as I have proposed, that Spinoza is entirely serious about fashioning a language that is equal to the task of registering philosophical truth, and that even the most unorthodox appropriations of existing terminology are based firmly on accepted principles of accident and etymology, then attention to the linguistic underpinnings of a given formulation must be seen as crucial to its adequate explication. To suggest otherwise is to accuse Spinoza of either linguistic incompetence or wilful obscurantism, both of which charges have been thoroughly discredited by recent scholarship. But if linguistic analysis has an undeniable place in any examination of the *Ethics*, it is no magic wand that will instantly banish all interpretive difficulties. Its role is not to explain the intricacies of essence, the nature of infinite modes or what is to be understood by

“God’s idea”; rather, it aims to bring the non-Latinist reader to the point where a properly philosophical investigation might begin. Or, to put it another way, an understanding of how signification is accomplished by the structures of the Latin text may not open the door to instant revelation, but it might well forestall speculation as to a meaning that the particular form of the Latin in question unequivocally precludes.

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## NOTES

1. To limit this observation to the *Ethics* is not to suggest that closer linguistic analysis would not benefit the study of Spinoza's other works. It is, though, particularly appropriate to the task of interpreting the *Ethics*, given Spinoza's strategies of assigning non-traditional meanings to key terms and securing those meanings by means of the geometric method as discussed later in the paper. References to the *Ethics* are provided in abbreviated form. E.g., reference to Part 1 Definition 1 is "EID1" and reference to Part 2 Proposition 2 is "EIIP2."
2. The claim to be able to "shed light" on questions that have been microscopically dissected by scholars too numerous to list might seem excessive. I'm not suggesting, however, that morphemic analysis is likely to lead directly to radical reinterpretation of Spinoza's philosophy; rather, that there are instances where close attention to accident and etymology will indicate more precisely than otherwise determinable the range and scope of possible significations, thus making a valuable contribution to the critique of particular positions.
3. While I can't claim to have made an exhaustive survey of scholarship in other languages, some initial impressions may be worth noting. First, no systematic explication of Latin terminology at the level of morphemic structure appears to have been attempted in any language. Second, English-language commentary, even where the author shows evidence of a thorough understanding of Latin, tends to be written for a non-Latinist readership. In contrast, French commentary is far more likely to assume that the reader will have a grounding in Latin. The continuing emphasis on the teaching of Latin in France and other continental countries, in contrast to Anglophone educational practice, is a possible explanation of this difference.
4. As Yitzhak Y. Melamed notes in the entry on Spinoza in *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, the philological study of Spinoza has been largely the province of Dutch scholars, in particular Fokke Akkerman and Piet Steenbakkers. The fact that much of their work is not widely available is, perhaps, testimony in itself of the relative neglect of linguistic matters.
5. Don Garrett, "Spinoza's Ethical Theory." *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*. Ed. Don Garrett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 272.
6. Don Garrett's discussion of *perfectus* at least has the merit of distinguishing between its different meanings, and he rightly emphasizes the importance of the idea of completion if the term is to be understood adequately in its Spinozistic context. This is not always the case with other commentators. Aaron V. Garrett, for example, in *Meaning in Spinoza's Method* makes frequent reference to "perfection" but seems to assume that its meaning is entirely transparent. To take just one instance he notes, in a discussion of the preface to Part IV of the *Ethics*, that Spinoza "considered the idea of 'perfection' as particularly suspicious." See Aaron V. Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza's Method*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 35. A closer look at Spinoza's text, however, shows that it is not the concept of completion that he is questioning but the subjective judgement of what constitutes perfection in the commonly understood sense.
7. Alan Donagan, "Spinoza's Theology." *Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, 379n2.
8. While the explanation I have suggested avoids the "gender trap," it is admittedly rather simplistic. Commenting on the same problem, Richard Mason, in *The God of Spinoza*, is careful to note that although *deus* is "grammatically masculine" (emphasis added) it is "absolutely certain that 'God' cannot be read without serious reservation as 'he'." The point as such is not developed further, but the residual anthropomorphism that haunts Spinoza's otherwise non-gendered God is accounted for by Mason's broader thesis. By defining God as an "absolutely infinite being" (EID6), Spinoza introduces his God not "from a theological or moral direction" but "by using a

mathematical or physical notion.” Yet, for all the mathematical precision of Spinoza’s method, God’s relation to the world (EIP29S) is “given in language taken from medieval theology.” The masculinity of God, it would seem, is part and parcel of that language. See Richard Mason, *The God of Spinoza: A Philosophical Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 25, 27, 29. An acknowledgement of God’s problematic gender can also be found in Genevieve Lloyd’s *Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Spinoza and the Ethics*, with the addition of quotation marks to the subheading “God and ‘his’ attributes.” See Genevieve Lloyd, *The Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Spinoza and the Ethics*. London: Routledge, 1996, 30. Lloyd makes no further comment and continues in the body of the text to refer to God as “he”; nevertheless, the point has been made, even if it’s not entirely clear whether its target is the misrepresentation of Spinoza’s theology or patriarchal language more generally.

9. Martin Lin, “The Power of Reason in Spinoza.” *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics*. Ed. Olli Koistinen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 267. The context of Lin’s remark is a discussion of the influence of the passions on our “power of acting.”

10. While Lin’s overall account of the passions is lucid and informative, the way the Latin conveys the notion of passivity is, on account of these errors, anything but clear.

11. *The Bloomsbury Companion to Spinoza*. Ed., Wiep van Bunge, Henri Krop, Piet Steenbakkers and Jeroen van de Ven. London: Bloomsbury, 2011, s.v. “Modus,” 260. Note that prior to Bloomsbury’s acquisition of Continuum in 2011 this same text was published as *The Continuum Companion to Spinoza*.

12. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879, s.v. “modus,” 1156.

13. *Bloomsbury Companion*, s.v., “Modus,” 261.

14. *Bloomsbury Companion*, 261.

15. *Bloomsbury Companion*, s.v., “Modificatio,” 258-9.

16. All direct quotations from the Ethics are taken from the Curley translation.

17. EIIP6 reads: “The modes of each attribute have God for their cause only insofar as he is considered under the attribute of which they are modes, and not insofar as he is considered under any other attribute.” I have omitted reference to EIIA3 as “modes of thinking” (*modi cogitandi*) is clearly a case of “mode” used in what Krop describes as its “non-technical sense of way or manner.”

18. Yitzhak Y. Melamed, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics: Substance and Thought*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 10-12. The phrase, “the most general principles of order” is taken from a paragraph quoted by Melamed from Edwin Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method: A Reading of Spinoza’s Ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988, 42.

19. *Bloomsbury Companion*, s.v. “Esse,” 208.

20. *Bloomsbury Companion*, s.v., “Essentia,” 210.

21. From the “a priori” knowledge of the existence of God Spinoza deduces that: “The essence of things are from all eternity, and unto all eternity shall remain immutable.” *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being*, Part I, Chapter 1. Baruch Spinoza, *Complete Works*. Trans. Samuel Shirley et. al. Ed. Michael L. Morgan. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002, 37.

22. See Melamed, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics*. To be fair, Melamed quotes extensively from Spinoza’s own explication of essence to provide a reasonably adequate sense of how the term is to be understood in relation to particular contexts. The point about the elusiveness of the concept per se, however, remains. Explicit clarification is either circular (“God’s essence or nature”) or tautological (the “essence [i.e., the essential attributes] of the mouse”). Definitional precision

- is most closely approached with the distinction between essence and its *propria* or properties. Again, though, apart from the scholastic explanation of essence as “the qualities that make the thing what it is” these qualities are identifiable more through what is excluded than included. Melamed, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics*, 50, 39, 51
23. See, for example, Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza’s Method*, 57, 62.
24. Interestingly, this apparent synonymity might seem to be sanctioned by Spinoza himself given that in EIP33S1 he refers to the impossibility of a thing’s existence where “its essence, or definition, involves a contradiction.” The Latin conjunction is *seu*, an alternative form of the more usual *sive*, which certainly indicates some degree of interchangeability, but only in the immediate context to which it applies and not more generally. See *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968, s.v. “sive,” §9, 1776.
25. Jonathan Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001. Vol. 1, 114.
26. “Translator’s Preface.” Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect and Selected Letters*. 2nd edition. Ed. Seymour Feldman. Trans. Samuel Shirley. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1992, 22-3.
27. A particularly telling example occurs in EIIP10 and EIIP11D where both Shirley and Curley translate *essentia hominis* as “the essence of man.” Given that the discussion of essence is linked not to categories or classes but to the “idea of a singular thing which actually exists” (EIIP11), it arguably makes more sense to translate *essentia hominis* as “the essence of a man.”
28. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. I. Ed. Edwin Curley. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, 621.
29. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 647. A comparison of Curley’s treatment of these terms with Filippo Mignini’s in his Italian translation of the Ethics points to an important difference between the two languages. The Italian is so similar to the Latin (*natura naturans* becomes *natura naturante* and *natura naturata* remains unchanged) that the dilemma facing an English translator simply doesn’t arise. Not only is there no need to retain the Latin, but additionally the way the morphemic structure produces its meaning requires no explanation as it is essentially the same in both languages. The only annotation Mignini includes is a redirection to chapter 8 of the *Short Treatise* for an explanation of the distinction between the two terms. See *Spinoza Opere*. Trans. Filippo Mignini and Omero Proietti. Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 2007, 818, 1634n87.
30. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 632.
31. Shirley, “Translator’s Preface.” Spinoza, *Complete Works*, viii. Spinoza’s remark to Oldenberg occurs in Letter 13. The “friend” is Lodewijk Meyer, who is not identified in the letter but is named in an editorial note.
32. Iiro Kajanto, “Spinoza’s Latinity.” *Spinoza to the Letter: Studies in Words, Texts and Books*. Eds Fokke Akkerman and Piet Steenbakkers. Leiden: Brill, 2005, 35-54.
33. Kajanto, “Spinoza’s Latinity,” 35.
34. Kajanto, “Spinoza’s Latinity,” 36.
35. See Kajanto, “Spinoza’s Latinity,” 35.
36. Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 587. (Emphasis added.) The posthumous editors referred to are Lodewijk Meyer and Johan Bouwmeester.
37. Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 584-5.
38. Phillip Mitsis, “Cicero, Marcus Tullius.” *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd edition. Ed. Robert Audi. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 143.
39. Kajanto, “Spinoza’s Latinity,” 37.
40. Kajanto, “Spinoza’s Latinity,” 49.

41. See Kajanto, "Spinoza's Latinity," 45-50.
42. Michelle Beyssade, "Deux latinistes: Descartes et Spinoza." *Spinoza to the Letter: Studies in Words, Texts and Books*. Eds Fokke Akkerman and Piet Steenbakkers. Leiden: Brill, 2005, 55. (My translation.)
43. Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning*, Vol. I. New York: Schocken Books, 1969, 10.
44. Most notably, it is Wolfson's failure to recognize the significance of the geometric method that comes under fire. Aaron Garrett sees him as an "extreme" representative of this view, on account of his observation that "there is no logical connection between the substance of Spinoza's philosophy and the form in which it is written". See Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* I, 55; quoted in Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza's Method*, 17.
45. A key passage, quoted and discussed by Lærke at the start of his article, occurs in the Explanation following EIII Definitions of the Affects XX where Spinoza seeks to distinguish between "favor" [*favor*] and "indignation" [*indignatio*]. After acknowledging that "in their common usage these words mean something else," he observes that his "purpose is to explain the nature of things, not the meaning of words." He concludes by stating: "I intend to indicate these things by words whose meaning is not entirely opposed to the meaning with which I wish to use them. One warning of this should suffice."
46. See Mogens Lærke. "Spinoza's Language." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 52.3 (2014, 519-47).
47. Lærke, "Spinoza's Language," 522.
48. Lærke, "Spinoza's Language," 522.
49. David Savan. "Spinoza and Language." *Philosophical Review* 67. 2 (1958, 220).
50. Savan, "Spinoza and Language," 221. The notion of an *ens rationis* having "no existence outside the intellect" echoes the distinction Krop draws between *ens* and *esse*.
51. Savan, "Spinoza and Language," 222.
52. Savan, "Spinoza and Language," 223.
53. Lærke, "Spinoza's Language," 524-5.
54. Lærke, "Spinoza's Language," 528. "Common notions" should not be confused with "what men commonly understand" (EI, Appendix) or "common usage" (EIII, Explanation of Definition of the Affects XX).
55. Lærke, "Spinoza's Language," 525-6.
56. See Lærke, "Spinoza's Language," 530, 535-6.
57. See Lærke, "Spinoza's Language," 529.
58. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Preface to an Edition of Nizolius 1670 (Selections)." *Philosophical Papers and Letters*. 2nd edition. Trans. Leroy E. Loemker. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989, 123-4. Leibniz's emphatic endorsement of ordinary language over scholastic "obscurity" seems to relate more to the position he wishes to adopt in this particular preface than to his own practice more generally, or to the somewhat different opinion he has expressed elsewhere. In "Discourse on Metaphysics," §11, for example, he insists that "in the views of Scholastic philosophers and theologians there is much more of value than people suppose," and that if a "thoughtful mind took the trouble to clarify and digest their thoughts ... he would find a considerable treasure of many very important and completely demonstrable truths." See Gottfried William Leibniz, *Philosophical Texts*. Trans. Richard Francks and R.S. Woolhouse. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 62.
59. René Descartes, "Rules for the Direction of the Mind." *The Philosophical Writings of Decartes*,

- Vol. I. Trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 15. Quoted in Lærke, “Spinoza’s Language,” 536-7.
60. Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *Logique du Port-Royal*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992, 79. Quoted in Lærke. “Spinoza’s Language,” 536-7.
61. Lærke, “Spinoza’s Language,” 530.
62. Pierre-François Moreau, *Spinoza. L’expérience et l’éternité*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1994, 366-7. Quoted in Lærke, “Spinoza’s Language,” 523.
63. Lærke, “Spinoza’s Language,” 524.
64. The view that the alleged impenetrability of the *Ethics* which derives from Neoplatonic or Kabbalistic mysticism has less currency than formerly, but nevertheless, as Steven Nadler points out, “continues, to some degree, in recent scholarship.” See Steven Nadler, “Introduction,” *Spinoza and Medieval Jewish Philosophy*. Ed. Steven Nadler. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 1, 1 n5. It is implicit in Savan’s presumption that Spinoza “did not intend the *Ethics* to be a simple exposition of truth,” a position whose lineage he suggests is traceable “at least to the Parmenides of Plato.” See Savan, “Spinoza and Language,” 216. Interestingly, while his own approach is uncompromisingly rationalistic, Alain Badiou is not entirely unsympathetic to mystical readings of the *Ethics* which he describes as “something that composes the strange unity of three different intellectual creations: conceptual, spiritual and artistic”. See Alain Badiou, “What is a Proof in Spinoza’s Ethics?” *Spinoza Now*. Ed. Dimitris Vardoulakis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 40. For Badiou it is the proofs, in all their detail, that are most crucial to the logic of the geometric method. If one accepts this view then the importance of attending closely to Spinoza’s language can hardly be over-estimated
65. *Bloomsbury Companion*, v.s. “Conceptus,” 320.
66. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1968, s.v. “con-,” 383, “per-,” 1326.
67. Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “concupio,” 400, “percipio,” 1334.
68. Albert Blaise, *Lexicon latinitatis medii aevi*. Turnhout: Brepols, 1975, s.v. “natura,” 612.
69. There is some debate as to whether God equates to the *whole* of nature or only to *natura naturans*. Clearly, the view one takes will depend on one’s position on the relation of modes to substance. For Curley, God can only be *natura naturans*, the cause of modal change; as he puts it after considering passages from several of Spinoza’s texts, “substance” appears to denote “not the whole of Nature, but only its active part, its primary elements.” See Edwin Curley, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics: An Essay in Interpretation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969, 42. Not unexpectedly, given his wider critique of Curley’s view of causation, Melamed challenges this position. How, he asks, can it be reconciled with Spinoza’s repeated claim that “there is nothing outside God”? See Melamed, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics*, 17-20.