

This paper makes a classical Latinist's intervention into the ongoing study of an important and timely neo-Latin text. It has a further, broader purpose of exemplifying the high stakes and perennial importance, across the disciplines of academic humanism, of philological precision.

A major work of early modern European philosophy composed in Latin, the *Ethics* (1677) of Benedict (Baruch) Spinoza stands at or near the culmination of a millennial project initiated chiefly by Cicero and aimed at honing Latin prose into an adequately precise and subtle linguistic instrument for doing philosophy. Recent new interest in Spinoza's life and thought has widened the potential readership for this very difficult thinker, so that numerous guides and introductions to Spinoza are now available to the general reader and beginning philosophy student. In some otherwise excellent examples of this eisagogic literature produced by specialists, a misconstrual of the Latin at a crucial passage of the *Ethics* has resulted in a demonstrably wrong interpretation of a central concept in Spinoza's metaphysics: the *conatus* or "striving" of everything existing to remain in existence.

Spinoza introduces this concept at *Ethics* 3P6 in the following terms: "Each and every thing, *quantum in se est*, strives to persevere in its being." The phrase left untranslated is the one at issue. Michael Della Rocca, writing in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza* (1996, 192-215), and Roger Scruton, writing in *Philosophy I: A Guide Through the Subject* (1995, 457) and *Spinoza: A Very Short Introduction* (2002, 62-6), as well as Samuel Shirley in his 2002 translation of the complete works, all take *quantum in se est* to mean "insofar as it" (i.e., the thing in question) "is in itself."

This rendering serves up serious philosophical difficulties of different kinds to both Della Rocca and Scruton. Della Rocca supposes that *quantum in se est* amounts to the same thing as "unless prevented by external causes," with the result that things like burning candles pose apparently indefeasible counterexamples to Spinoza's theory of *conatus*, since these consistently burn themselves out of existence with no external interference. Scruton, on the other hand, notices that Spinoza's assertion that God is the only substance and therefore the only thing "in itself" (*in se*) makes trouble for any interpretation of *Ethics* 3P6 that requires positing a hierarchical continuum in which one existing item can be more "in itself" or less "in itself" than another. Scruton's hasty solution is to distinguish, without argument, between what Spinoza asserts "strictly speaking" and a looser view (nowhere substantiated in Spinoza's writing) on which a lesser being can somehow participate in the "divine characteristic" of being in itself.

But these insoluble problems cannot be charged to Spinoza's theory of the *conatus*, because they are not Spinoza's problems. They arise from a mistranslation of the phrase *quantum in se*. Spinoza, an excellent Latinist, knew that this particular combination of words could only mean "as much as is *in it*"—that is, "as much as it can"—and had nothing to do with a thing's being "in itself" as opposed to its being "in something else" (though that is indeed a distinction Spinoza draws elsewhere). The paper will quickly survey some examples, from Florus and Augustine to William of Ockham and Descartes, to show that "as much as is in it" was the consistent meaning of the phrase *quantum in se est* from late antiquity through early modern neo-Latin. A conclusion will briefly address the consequences for our understanding of Spinoza's thought.