

The Collected Works of Spinoza, Vol. 2. Edited by Edwin Curley. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

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Date of deposit	24/04/2017
Document version	Author's accepted manuscript
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Citation for published version	Xavier Douglas, A. (2016). The Collected Works of Spinoza, Vol. 2. Edited by Edwin Curley. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. <i>The Leibniz Review</i> , 26, 199-206.
Link to published version	https://dx.doi.org/10.5840/leibniz2016269

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The second volume of Edwin Curley's translation, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, is probably the most eagerly awaited publication in the world of English-speaking Spinoza scholarship. It brings Curley's translation to cover every piece of writing so far discovered and known to be by Spinoza, excluding only his *Hebrew Grammar*. In the general preface, Curley states that, "granted ... continued longevity and good health," (xvii) he intends to translate those portions of the *Grammar* likely to be of philosophical interest.

Volume Two contains two major works, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (published 1670) and the (uncompleted) *Tractatus Politicus* (published posthumously 1677), and all discovered letters known to be to and from Spinoza from late 1665 onwards (picking up where the last volume left off).

An owner of the two-volume set will possess an English translation of (almost) Spinoza's entire corpus and correspondence, a general preface to each volume, and prefaces to each major work and each group of letters, all written by Curley. Throughout the work are detailed explanatory footnotes, noting where Spinoza surreptitiously alludes to other authors, pointing out where the various authoritative editions of Spinoza's text diverge, highlighting passages that have been particularly difficult to interpret and the controversies they have caused, and providing other useful information to the reader. Each volume is organized chronologically (Curley employs some impressive research to determine the dates of the unpublished works and also explains how he arrived at his conclusions), with main works situated appropriately among groups of letters.

Each volume also contains a Glossary-Index. This is a list of key words that appear in the translation. Each is accompanied by the Latin and/or Dutch term (or terms) Curley has generally construed by that word and often an

explanation of the decision. It also contains information about relevant works by other authors – contemporaries of Spinoza or authors who influenced him – in which the same terms appear. The volumes contain indices allowing the reader to find words in the main text by looking up the English terms or the Latin or Dutch cognates. Additionally there are indices of proper names and, in Volume Two, of Biblical and Talmudic references.

There is far more to this resource, even before getting to the translation itself. The footnotes throughout both volumes are so detailed as to amount to a running commentary, drawing on Curley's own scholarship as well as the best scholarship from around the world. In the political works there are many footnotes comparing Spinoza's views to those of Hobbes, Grotius, Machiavelli, etc. Curley also regularly engages with the commentaries given in the various editions of Spinoza's works, which he has consulted in detail.

While this is incredibly useful in the case of the major works, it is perhaps even more so in the case of the letters. For one thing, the letters are full of oblique references to people and works ("a certain man", "a certain book") helpfully identified in the footnotes through careful scholarship. For another, Spinoza's correspondents often cite works that might be unfamiliar even to scholars (*On Ghosts*, by Johannes Wierius); the footnotes provide enough relevant information to save the reader having to go to the encyclopaedia except in cases of particular interest. The prefaces also contain biographies of the main correspondents, presentations of research into undated letters and unnamed correspondents, information on how various letters were discovered and verified, and other very useful scholarly material.

The footnotes also provide some very interesting prompts for further thought and study. One example is in the *TTP* (256n.13). Curley notes that Spinoza “greatly exaggerates the speed with which the story of Jesus spread throughout the Roman empire”, and ought to have known he was doing so from his reading of Josephus and Tacitus. We are thus invited to speculate on why Spinoza might have made this apparently deliberate exaggeration. Does it justify a ‘Straussian’ reading of Spinoza, according to which Spinoza did not always write exactly what he believed when it came to Scripture and religion?¹ Many other similar examples can be found.

Besides this, the footnotes demonstrate Curley’s extraordinary attention to detail, often conveyed in an enjoyably wry tone. In one letter, Spinoza writes to Hugo Boxel that he did not bother to buy a book criticising his own work, believing it to be “not worth reading, much less answering” (407). Curley’s footnote points out that a copy of the book (Reiner van Mansvelt’s *Adversus anonymum theologico-politicum liber singularis*) was in fact found in Spinoza’s library after his death and continues: “Perhaps someone gave it to him.”

In sum, Curley’s *Collected Works* is the largest concentration of editorial and scholarly background material on Spinoza to be found in a single work. The *Presses Universitaires de France* edition of Spinoza’s works, when completed, would be the only indirect competitor. Curley’s work would remain the largest concentration of material in English.

The contribution to the field is immeasurable. Students can own extremely accurate English translations of Spinoza’s work plus a vast amount of

¹ Curley defends a moderate Straussian reading of the *TTP*: Edwin Curley, “Resurrecting Leo Strauss,” in *Reading Between the Lines - Leo Strauss and the History of Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Winfried Schröder (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).

scholarly material for less than US\$100. Historians of philosophy in general will find virtually everything they need to know about Spinoza contained in the two volumes. Spinoza scholars will find the work an invaluable guide when venturing beyond their own expertise (every Spinoza scholar knows some works better than others and some of Spinoza's influences and adversaries better than others). Naturally it would be even better if Volume One could be updated to incorporate developments in the scholarship since 1985. Curley hints at this possibility in the general preface to Volume Two (xvii).

The release of Volume Two is also well timed, in that there has been a clear spiking of interest, particularly in the anglophone world, in the two main works that appear in this volume. Curley himself refers to four relatively recent works specifically focussed on the *TTP*.ⁱ More generally, Spinoza's reputation as a political philosopher is on the rise. It is ceasing to be the case that, as the 2013 Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on Spinoza's political philosophy states, "in anglophone countries, Spinoza's reputation as a political thinker is eclipsed by his reputation as a rationalist metaphysician."ⁱⁱ Curley's Volume Two arrives in time to meet this growing interest. No doubt it will also amplify the tendency by making Spinoza's *TTP* and *TP* available to a wider audience and providing a commentary that explains their unique value.

It will also advance the understanding of Spinoza as a writer on religion. The footnotes to Volume Two explain Spinoza's biblical references and interpretations and make useful comparisons with the religious thinkers most likely to have caught Spinoza's attention, including Maimonides, Gersonides, Calvin, Mannaseh ben Israel, and Lodewijk Meyer (Curley helpfully adds page references to Samuel Shirley's 2005 translation of Meyer's *Philosophy the*

Interpreter of Scripture, where references to the original are found in the Marchand edition).

There is another sense in which the work is particularly timely. Spinoza scholarship in the anglosphere has come a very long way since the publication of Volume One. Detailed textual knowledge of Spinoza's main works – in some cases the *Ethics* alone – was once regarded as sufficient for academic work. Now it is expected that Spinoza scholars will have a good background knowledge of his philosophical context and key influences. The community of Spinoza scholars is better placed to benefit from Curley's immensely learned commentary than it was in 1985. In any case, the existence of these two volumes, plus resources such as the *Bloomsbury Companion to Spinoza* mean that any anglophone Spinoza scholar who lacks a good grasp of the scholarly background is now without excuse.

On the matter of the translation itself, Curley is very explicit about his approach. In the general preface he lists six goals:

1. To provide translations that are as accurate as possible and as clear and readable as fidelity to the text will allow.
2. To use the best available critical editions of the original texts.
3. To make available all the primary data for the interpretation of [Spinoza's] philosophy.
4. To offer translations all by the same hand, which are consistent in the treatment of important terms.
5. To arrange the texts in chronological order.
6. To supply the texts with editorial aids to assist in understanding Spinoza's work.

I have already said enough about Goals 3 and 6, which are abundantly met. Concerning Goal 4, one need only consult the Glossary-Indices of both volumes to see how careful Curley has been about rendering terms consistently. Curley is clear on the purposes of this (607-8). One is to allow the reader to see the frequency with which Spinoza uses a single term. Another is (I extrapolate this from Curley's example) to make the reader aware, when Spinoza gives an idiosyncratic definition or unusual examples of a term, that when the same term appears elsewhere it might be used with the same idiosyncratic sense.

Not only does Curley aim to render Spinoza's key terms consistently, he also does so with an eye to maintaining consistency with translations of other relevant works. One example is his construal of "*fortuna*" as "fortune" rather than "luck", as Bennett's version has it.ⁱⁱⁱ This allows the reader to notice the resonance with Machiavelli; in most English translations of *The Prince* and *The Discourses* the word "fortune" features heavily.^{iv}

Concerning Goal 2, one need only note how often in the footnotes Curley points out divergences among various editions. Here again Curley's attention to detail is extraordinary. It will interest Spinoza scholars to note that, in addition to the Gebhardt edition, Curley has made use of Akkerman's edition of the *TTP* and the Akkerman-Hubbeling translation of the correspondence (which includes some amendments to the Gebhardt text). He has also consulted the PUF editions of the *TTP* and *TP*. Reasonably enough, Curley states: "I generally assume that Gebhardt's text is correct, and do not discuss earlier editions when I think he has clearly improved on them" (xvi). He does, however, point out problems with Gebhardt's text that are brought out in the newer editions.

The only remaining question concerns the accuracy and readability of Curley's translation – Goal 1. The consultation of various editions, the detailed attention to the use of terms that went into the production of the Glossary-Index, the consultation of a vast range of scholarship, Curley's mastery of both Latin and Dutch and his years of experience as a scholar and translator combine to make it beyond doubt that this is the most accurate translation available. Only Jonathan Israel and Michael Silverthorne's translation of the *TTP* has anything approaching this level of scholarship behind it. It could be a competitor to a single volume containing only Curley's translation of the *TTP*; it is, of course, no competition for Curley's translation plus the immense editorial supplements found in the *Collected Works*.

Translating Latin presents certain difficulties. For example, definite and indefinite articles are rarely used. In most cases it is obvious from the context which is meant, but often this requires some knowledge beyond the context. For instance, Spinoza suggests in the *TTP* (ch.15, §44, III/188), that "*simplex obedientia via ad salutem [est]*". Curley construes this: "simple obedience is a path to salvation" (281, my emphasis). There is very good reason to believe that Spinoza did not believe obedience to be the *only* path to salvation, and his own footnote to the passage strongly suggests as much. But this has not stopped other translators getting it wrong; the Elwes translation has: "simple obedience is *the* path of salvation", a very significant mistake.^v Curley's scholarship renders him much less likely to make such mistakes, including in cases less obvious than this one.

It should in fairness be noted that standards of translation have improved greatly since Elwes's time. Neither Shirley nor Silverthorne and Israel make

Elwes's mistake noted above. Nor do either of them make Elwes's mistakes in the first sentence of Chapter 15 and of Chapter 16 (these were pointed out to me by Curley himself; the curious reader can identify them by comparing the various translations and the original text). Curley's translation must be measured against high general standards of readability and accuracy.

The main special difficulty in translating Spinoza is the idiosyncratic sense Spinoza often gives to his terms. One problematic example is the word "*pietas*". In Volume One, Curley translates this as "morality". He explains that he avoids "piety" because it is clear from context that Spinoza took the term in its Classical sense, "encompassing dutifulness towards your native country and your relatives, and kindness in general" (Vol 1., 646). In Volume Two this will not quite do; Curley notes that

Given the *TTP*'s goal of persuading educated Christians that allowing religious liberty is not necessarily harmful to their religion, emphasizing the religious connotations of *pietas* seems particularly appropriate here. (648)

Thus he generally renders the term by its English cognate.

But that is not the end of the puzzle. Theo Verbeek notes that: "For a 17th-century reader, the practical connotations of 'pietas' – generally translated in the period as 'holiness', 'godliness', or, in Dutch, '*godzaligheid*' – would be evident".^{vi} To such a reader, a key connotation of the term would be submission to God's Law. Spinoza does not believe that God can be a lawgiver. He provides an alternative understanding of divine law in Chapter Four of the *TTP*, but he does not define "*pietas*" in terms of it; meanwhile in the *Ethics* (Scholium to Proposition 37, Part 4) he identifies "*pietas*" with the desire to do good generated in us by reason. It is important to realise, then, that Spinoza is not simply using the term "*pietas*" in a sense his readers will understand; he is looking to

transform their understanding of the concept. This is very difficult to show in a translation. Rendering the term “piety” is, I believe, the best one can do with the translation alone; the only way to approach real accuracy is to provide supplementary material explaining the problems raised by the term. That, of course, is what Curley does. His Glossary-Index and other editorial aids, in other words, allow him to achieve a level of accuracy that no translation could manage on its own.

That leaves only the matter of readability. Curley aids readability by breaking up Spinoza’s long sentences, creating numbered lists where Spinoza makes points in sequence, and so on. These aid reading immensely without losing accuracy; they should be praised without controversy. As to style – an intensely personal matter – Curley renders Spinoza’s text into lucid, direct, and informal English prose. The style is more colloquial than that of Shirley’s Spinoza, who maintains a loftier tone, or Silverthorne and Israel’s Spinoza, who is rather more mannered. All the modern English translations seem to me quite comfortable to read (here again an invidious comparison with Elwes is unavoidable). The rest is a matter of taste. I must note that Curley does an exceptional job of bringing out Spinoza’s sense of humour.

Obviously a true Spinoza enthusiast should consult all the modern translations as well as the original editions. Equally obviously, anyone with more than a passing interest in Spinoza must make the fullest possible use of Curley’s masterpiece.

ⁱ Susan James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Theo Verbeek, *Spinoza’s*

Theologico-Political Treatise: Exploring “The Will of God” (Aldershot: Routledge, 2003); Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Michael A. Rosenthal, *Spinoza’s “Theological-Political Treatise”: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza’s Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

ⁱⁱ Justin Steinberg, “Spinoza’s Political Philosophy,” ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, April 21, 2008, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/spinoza-political/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/spinoza1669.pdf>

^{iv} A discussion of Machiavelli’s use of the term is found in the preface to Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, ed. Bernard Crick, trans. Brian Richardson and Leslie Walker (Penguin, 2013), 55–6.

^v Benedict de Spinoza, *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, trans. R.H.M. Elwes (London: George Bell and Sons, 1891), Vol. 1, 199. My emphasis.

^{vi} Verbeek, *Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise*, 7.

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